HEAVY OBJECT Volume 4

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ヘヴィーオブジェクト 電子数学の財宝

ミニスカサンタ！　無表情だけどむしろその魅力がたまらないエリートお姫様と、何食べたらそんな爆乳になるのか不明な鬼上官フローレイティアさんのミニスカサンタが目の前にっ……！

いつも『はずれくじ』ばかりの不良兵士・クウェンサーとヘイヴィア。しかし彼らにも、ようやくご褒美が到来!?　戦場になった南半球オセアニア方面で、常夏のクリスマスパーティが開催された!!「俺達、この戦争が終わったらミニスカサンタとランデヴーするんだ……」

いったいどうなる近未来アクション！

か-12-29

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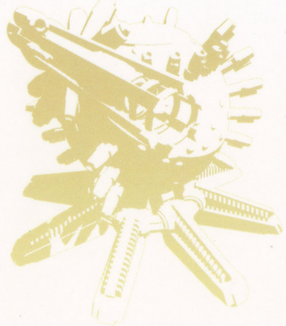

鎌池和馬（かまちかずま）

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。サイです。兵器の参考になりそうな動物、というと肉食動物を思い浮かべそうですが、デカい草食動物の足を研究して、あの体重をどうやって支えているのかを調べるのが巨大ロボット兵器実現の第一歩なのかも？

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カバー／暁印刷

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良
NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

THEORETICAL WEAPON 電子数学の財宝

人生を効率良く生きていきたい
戦地派遣留学生の少年

クウェンサー

「仕掛けるしかないか」

変わり者の貴族にして不良系軍人

ヘイヴィア

「クウェンサー、本気で言ってんのかよ？」

『情報同盟』所属の自軍のエリートを溺愛する
お茶目な指揮官

レンディ＝ファロリート中佐

「だめっ、可愛らしいお尻を
そんなアヒルの赤ちゃんみたいに振って、
転ぶ、転ぶ、転んじゃう、わーっ……」

愛する我が子を心配する
『情報同盟』系のジャーナリスト

ロイス

「……娘がここに派遣されてきているんだ。
どんな場所か、
自分の目で確かめてみたかった」

宗教的規約に反した者を始末する
『信心組織』の女性天罰集団『ヴァルキリエ』の兵士

サラサ

「そのイントネーションは……
『正統王国』か。ここで何をしている？」

逃亡中である『信心組織』所属の枢機卿

ロイベルツ＝オールドニック

「野蛮な輩に奪われた土地を、財産を、人々を、
もう一度集約させるのだ」

name / Milinda=Brantini
age / 14
sex / famale
place of birth / unknown
height / 1.55m
weight / 39kg
hair color / blond
body size / 79.56.80(cm)
eye color / sky blur
belong / 37th C.M.B.
post / Elite

INDEX

000010 序 章

000012 第一章
青一色の海のはずだが
>>ロワイヨーテ方面非正規戦

000110 第二章
白い砂浜のクリスマス
>>オセアニア方面休暇駐留戦(?)

000182 第三章
真っ赤に染まる海の宝
>>ソロモン方面防衛戦

000284 終 章

【ディープオプティカル】DEEP OPTICAL

『資本企業』軍、「クライアントセキュリティ社」所属のオブジェクト。
本国では『シャーベティ』と呼ばれている。

メインカラーリングは、灰色に近い青。最新第二世代の『ディープオプティカル』は球体状本体の真下に八本の脚を広げた、特殊な形状をしている。その八本全てがエアクッション機関として機能しており、水面であったとしても正確な水平を保つ海上戦闘特化型である。

主砲については、『ディープオプティカル』の右手側上部に巨大なレーザービーム砲が取り付けられ、球体状本体には八本もの太い円筒が主砲の台座を中心に時計の文字盤のように設置されている。その八本で生み出したエネルギーを集約し、巨大な一本のレーザー砲として機能する。

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 inc.)

歴史を動かせる。流れを変えられる。
持っている者と、持っていない者の違い。
それが、オブジェクトだ。

——とある僻地勤務の兵士のつぶやき

HEAVY OBJECT

THEORETICAL VEIN

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
電子数学の財宝

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

It happens once every few years or every few decades.

Surely you have heard that near-urban legend that is announced again and again.

Yes.

I am talking about the idea that the Earth's resources will dry up in the near future.

But so far, it has never happened. In fact, humanity would fall into ruin if it did happen. The only question is how it would happen. Would people continue to evenly divide everything up until the storerooms were empty so everyone starved together? Or would wars break out over the last remaining resources causing humanity to destroy itself before the resources actually ran out?

So why is it?

Talk of resources running out is quite common. It even has a certain credibility to it. The Earth is slowly producing resources even now, but the rate of consumption is clearly greater. There is no avoiding the fact that the resources will "eventually" and " surely" run out, but for some reason it has not yet happened.

Even with the wars being waged using those ridiculously huge Objects, the resources have yet to run out. I am sure you know just

how plentiful resources are and how constantly they are being consumed. The resources never seem to run out and yet it is clear this planet we call earth has a limited capacity.

So let me ask again.

Why?

Do these plausible announcements that keep coming actually have no basis in reality? Or do we keep conveniently finding a new mine of resources just when the current resources seem like they are about to dry up?

What I want to know is…

What do you think?

Chapter 1: What Should Have Been a Pure Blue Ocean >> Unofficial Battle in the Loyauté District

Part 1

The air was oppressively hot.

Buckets of torrential rain poured down on his head.

The large leaves of the tropical trees growing thickly around him caused a rumbling similar to a percussion instrument being struck repeatedly.

In all seriousness, Heivia Winchell wanted to check to make sure his neck was working properly. That was how heavy the rain constantly falling on his head was.

"…Dammit. Everything stinks of mud. Whatever happened to the coral ocean?"

The time was just before midnight.

He was in complete darkness. No artificial lights were lit and the thick rain clouds above his head cut off any light from the moon or stars.

As Heivia crouched down below a thick palm tree, another boy dressed in the same uniform crouched next to him. The other boy was named Quenser Barbotage. Instead of a rifle, he carried a bag filled with explosives.

"I thought we were supposed to have a champagne party after the princess blew away the Faith Organization's Generation 1 Object. Why are we going through this mental training out here in the rain?"

"Didn't you hear the additional radio announcement?" asked Heivia in annoyance. "This is the Loyauté district, an archipelago right next to Oceania. Due to the multinational coalition attack, the dictatorship in Oceania was destroyed and the area is in the process of being restored. You know that much, right?"

"Well, we were the ones to blow up the dictator in question."

Quenser recalled hearing something about Oceania having plenty of resources, so it could earn money so long as the facilities needed for mines and refineries were brought in.

Little by little, Oceanian coal, steel, and platinum was scheduled to be taken to the Legitimacy Kingdom, but that meant it was no longer just an area requiring protection. It was an area that could have business negotiations and enact trade.

"Well, the Loyauté district is being used as a midway Object resupply base. For that reason, the Oceanian resources are being brought through the Loyauté district where they are moved to different boats before heading out to the world."

"What does that have to do with us being neglected out here?"

"There will always be idiots who start scheming over this kind of thing. For example, some might attack the transport ships to steal the valuable resources."

"…What does that have to do with this?"

"The media is referring to them as Hyena. In this age of 'clean wars' that use Objects, the higher ups would lose face if they were done in by that analog method, so they sent these orders down to our unit."

"What does that have to do with this!? I don't know anything about Hyena! This isn't a war; it's a crime. They should send in uniformed police officers!!"

"These are our orders. And what clean freak police officer is going to come to an unstable area like this?"

"But we have Objects we could be using. Oceania is right there. The coalition is still intact, so we have plenty of Objects. I thought the Capitalist Corporations' Deep Optical was dealing with cleanup on the sea. Isn't it a brand-new Generation 2 that uses tons of laser technology?"

"Why are you grinning like that while thinking about enemy weapons?"

"At any rate, this isn't our kind of job! It just doesn't have the right sense of intelligence to it. We're more suited for some kind of smarter mission!!"

"I would like to get to sleep, too," cut in their commander Froleytia over the radio. "But this is the sad side of a Multi-Role Generation 1 Object that is seen as a convenient tool for any job. The Baby Magnum can fight people as well as vehicles, so the higher ups view it as more suitable for this kind of thing than the specialized Generation 2s. …So let's just crush these island platinum thieves and get to bed. You two, get down and cover your eyes. It's about to begin."

"…Seriously? The ground is stickier than some chocolate out in the summer sun."

"I think this much mud might make my skin a little too shiny and healthy…"

Without the tension of facing enemy troops, the two took a bit too long to take action.

They regretted this soon after.

The darkness was blown away by a flash of light as an Object bombardment roasted the earth.

It came from the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's Generation 1 Object known as the Baby Magnum.

The giant weapon had 7 main cannon arms stretching up from behind and over 100 other giant cannons covering its main body.

It had not just fired one of its main cannons. That had been a variety of the other cannons attached all over its spherical main body.

It fired laser beam cannons, rapid-fire beam cannons, coilguns, railguns, and low-stability plasma cannons.

They came roaring down like a shower of light, but Quenser and Heivia were unable to leisurely watch the sight as if it was a show in a concert hall.

"Ow!! Damn, the light is stabbing into my eyes!!"

"Rolling around on the ground isn't going to make your sense of pain go away! Let's just get our job over with, Heivia!!"

Quenser and Heivia headed on while meaninglessly rubbing at their eyes.

The Baby Magnum was bombarding an area about 5 kilometers away where Hyena had a beach bunker in which armored vehicles and high-speed patrol boats were hidden.

A thumb-sized piece of stone fell at Quenser's feet amid the great squall.

It was a piece of the bunker/hangar made of quick-dry concrete .

(As usual, that is a level of firepower I do not want to have as an enemy!!)

They were afraid to get any closer, but they had a job they had to complete.

"Quenser, do you have that kit?"

"I can set it up in 7 places in 10 minutes."

"Well, hurry. Hyena will be fleeing in this direction after being woken up by that horribly flashy alarm clock."

And so Quenser pulled out a few devices known as Cursors. They were cylinders 5 cm across and 10 cm long mostly made of reinforced plastic.

He checked the Cursors' frequency with his radio and then bound the cylinders to trees in the area using wires.

After setting up a few Cursors, he heard a few dull noises.

They were coming from palm trees that had been torn to pieces by the Baby Magnum's bombardment.

"(Quenser, get down! They're coming to show us their hospitality!!)"

"(Isn't this sooner than expected? I've only set up half of them!!)"

"(You should know by now that this always happens. Just get down!!)"

The undergrowth in the area trembled from something other than the torrential rain.

(Is it Hyena?)

Quenser looked around as he hid behind some trees.

Their job was supposed to have been setting traps to take out Hyena when they ran off in confusion due to the Baby Magnum's bombardment.

However, something else was happening.

Foot soldiers would not affect the undergrowth to such a great extent and the Baby Magnum was attacking a point over 5 kilometers away. Quenser doubted they could have made it that far so quickly.

Which meant…

"…Look, Heivia."

"Wait, don't raise your head. Do you want me to shoot you in the back of the head?"

"Is that thing noisily headed this way a tank?"

Heivia kicked the trunk of a palm tree without thinking and then curled up, holding his toes.

"(That damn large-breasted commandeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!)"

"I don't think there is any job here where you can make a lot of money while remaining in complete comfort. We'd just give up if there was."

"But pay is even across a rank!!"

"Heivia, what about an antitank missile?"

"That would be fine if a single shot could take care of it, but its sensors might detect the lock. Also, the missile would probably hit a tree before reaching the tank in this forest."

Quenser clicked his tongue.

Naturally, a normal rifle could not pierce tank armor. And Quenser's explosives would need to be brought close enough for the tank to be in range of the blast.

Of course, the odds were good the tank would notice him before he could get close enough to throw it and then he would end up being mowed down by a light machinegun.

"What do we do, Heivia?"

"I'd like to bring out some beer and have a round with them. This killing is wrong. The world should be at peace."

"…Pacifistic ideals tend to come from the losers, don't they?"

"Yeah, I guess they wouldn't go along with that." Heivia sighed as he scratched at his soaking-wet hair. "Then I guess we have no choice but to go through with this. Quenser, what about that kit?"

"Cursor?"

"Yes." Heivia pointed at the device attached to a palm tree. "It's an infrared trap that sends targeting information to the Object. Its sensors are directly linked to the Object's lock data, so the target caught in the trap has an almost 100% chance of being hit. Let's hurry up and set up that invisible net of lasers and blow them to pieces."

Part 2

By midnight, Hyena had been successfully eliminated.

"Sounds like Baby Magnum has finally ended its bombardment. "

"I need some eye drops. There's something wrong with my eyes . Hey, Quenser. Do you think they have Lasik surgery pamphlets at the base?"

A few armored vehicles had been sent out from the site of the bombardment, but most of them had been roasted by the Baby Magnum's laser beams. The others had been destroyed by the mobile maintenance battalion infantry and armored divisions surrounding the base.

The tank Quenser and Heivia had blown away using a Cursor had been one of those.

"I'm more afraid of friendly fire than a tank. The armor fragments blown off very nearly killed us."

"That explosive reactive armor is dangerous. Once it scatters around, the pieces are like land mines."

In that age, foot soldiers who had an Object on their side did not play the traditional role of infantry.

The soldiers could indirectly use the firepower of those gigantic weapons by transmitting targeting data, so they could conquer the battlefield with overwhelming speed.

Even if it was borrowed power, it still led to almost assured victory so long as they were able to borrow it.

However, the inclusion of Objects in infantry and tank conflicts meant that nigh unstoppable power was lost if the gigantic weapon was no longer there.

As the two boys leaned against palm trees in the soaking rain, a transmission came in from Froleytia.

"Thank you for a job well done. We have lowered Hyena's numbers enough that they should have difficulty taking further action or even reviving their numbers. Do a sweep of the area and then head back."

"(Once we get back, it'll probably be time for the debriefing and weapons maintenance, Quenser. And that includes the armored vehicles and fighters that people as low on the ladder as us never get to make use of.)"

"Hm? If you want to kill some time, Heivia, I recommend you search Hyena's base," said Froleytia. "You can join the intelligence team."

"No, thank you!! I'm not gonna investigate an enemy base after an Object blew it to pieces! Those monsters are famous for taking even dignity from corpses!!"

"I don't think I've ever seen a corpse that had dignity. Do you want them to be decorated with whipped cream and strawberries? But if you don't want to, then come back. If you two hang around out there, I don't get to rest either."

"(I think that's the real reason right there.)"

"Hurry up and come back," said Froleytia resolutely. She may have heard that comment. "We were supposed to be off duty once the princess blew away that Faith Organization Generation 1 Object. I want to get the unit to Oceania's coral ocean and white sand beach as soon as possible. Those damn old men keep forcing this extra work on us, but they refuse to push the final day of our leave back when they do. In other words, every second that passes is one second less we get off. So hurry up and get back!!"

Froleytia ended the transmission, but Quenser and Heivia did not look remotely upset.

They had learned something quite valuable.

"Did you hear that, Heivia?"

"It sounded to me like the entire unit is going on leave."

"And in the southern hemisphere, December is midsummer swimsuit season."

"…"

"…"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

"That means…That means this is what they call a swimsuit episode, Heivia!!"

"We get to see the wonderful collaboration of the princess's plain but lovely swimsuit and our large-breasted commander's almost unairable swimsuit, Quenser!!"

"I know. I know! I really like the idea of some time off. We've been working way too much lately!! What's with this human vs. Object nonsense!? They should give more thought before putting together wrestling death matches!!"

"There's nothing wrong with chatting in the classroom on occasion!!"

The two idiots began throwing their hands in the air and shouting "Hooray!!" repeatedly.

However, they suddenly heard metallic noises coming from all directions.

The noises were coming from rifles being aimed at them by numerous people who were oozing killer intent.

Quenser and Heivia froze in place at about the "hoo" part of " hooray".

The leader of the local armed group said, "If you have free time, then come with us."

Part 3

The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization.

The clean wars of the modern era were skirmishes between those world powers that each owned several Objects. The core of these wars was the clash between Objects that possessed overwhelming firepower. All other forces were used to keep the Objects running smoothly.

The Legitimacy Kingdom was completely ruled by a monarchy.

The Information Alliance determined good and evil by the amount and quality of information.

The Capitalist Corporations let economic activity surpass even human life.

The Faith Organization controlled society with religious faith.

The conflict between these new collective organizations that appeared upon the collapse of the UN showed absolutely no sign of ending. It was unclear if this was due to no one knowing how to bring it to an end or if there were those who did not wish for it to end.

Now…

Since Hyena was active on the Loyauté islands which had been used as a foothold for the destruction of the Oceanian military nation it would be easy to assume otherwise, but they were not affiliated with any of the world powers that owned many Objects.

They belonged to an area that barely had a government. Such areas were commonly referred to as blank areas.

As the area was not dyed in any of the colors of the world powers, the coalition army had decided to use it as a foothold.

In other words, even though the area had cooperated with the destruction of the Oceanian military nation and was being used as

a relay point for the resources being brought from Oceania as it was restored, the people living in the Loyauté district were hardly friends of Quenser and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

With all of that in mind, Quenser and Heivia had their hands bound behind their backs and their heads stuck in burlap sacks as they were brought to some unknown place.

The bags were taken from their heads, but they could not tell where they were just by looking around.

"Bhah!? Dammit, these bags were originally used as sandbags, weren't they!? My mouth was so full of dirt I couldn't breathe!!"

"You have guts to put a bag over our heads when we aren't the type to put a woman's stockings over our heads!!"

The two immediately lashed out vocally, but they calmed down once they had rifle barrels jabbed into their chests.

"Why the hell do we have to be captured while we're on leave of all times?"

"I think we should just be grateful this is some different organization from Hyena. If these were the remnants of Hyena, we would have been treated as outlets for their anger."

Dawn had come.

As soon as the sun came up, they were wrapped in humid but cool air.

However, the rain had yet to stop, so they could still hear a percussive noise coming from the ceiling over their heads.

Quenser and Heivia were in a wooden house made of logs and large leaves that was different from a Western European log house . The two boys sat in the center with a ring of swarthy-skinned men encircling them. The men all possessed rifles of an outdated model.

“If I’m gonna be surrounded, couldn’t it be by girls in palm leaf bikinis?”

“Open your eyes to reality, Heivia. Also, wouldn’t those hard leaves tear some delicate areas to pieces?”

“Can we get down to business?” asked a quiet voice.

A man who seemed to be their leader sat down directly in front of the two idiots who had had all of their equipment confiscated, from their weapons to their disgusting rations.

It was possible the man was not their leader but instead the only one of them who could speak a language those of the Legitimacy Kingdom would likely understand.

“We hope you can see our sincerity in the fact that we have invited you here in one piece.”

“If you’re thinking of ransoming us, give it up now,” said Heivia immediately. “Unfortunately, I am a noble where bloodline and honor trump all else. If you try to ransom me, my family will

certainly abandon me. They will simply say I died in the line of duty. So let's not waste either of our time."

"I'm a commoner. I don't think I'm worth much more than a 3000 Euro a month salary."

"We know very well who you are. And we know how impudent you can be," said the leader smoothly. Their comments had not bothered him at all. "Quenser Barbotage. Heivia Winchell. You both belong to the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and have destroyed several Objects without using an Object yourself."

"…"

"…"

Quenser and Heivia sighed heavily because they had a good idea what the men likely wanted of them.

"Let me warn you: About 80% of what you read in the newspaper and on the gossip sites are utter lies."

"If all of that was true, it would mean we had destroyed Second Generation Objects with nothing but our clenched fists."

The leader continued nonetheless.

"We have one demand," he said flatly. "The Capitalist Corporations have a Second Generation Object stationed here in the Loyauté district. I believe you call it the Deep Optical. We would like you to destroy it."

Quenser's lips twitched.

He had wanted to get a look at the Deep Optical once even if from afar, but he had not thought it would turn into something like this.

"Wait, wait, wait," said Heivia to cut off the man. "I don't know what crazy rumors you people have heard, but we're just flesh-and-blood humans!! If you just drop us in front of one of those monstrous weapons, no miracle is going to occur. You aren't mistaking us for androids made out of some kind of special alloy, are you!?"

"…"

"Also, don't just assume the enemy of your enemy is your friend!! And once you're taking on an Object, you have a war on your hands! The two of us can't just start a war between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Capitalist Corporations!!"

The leader snapped his fingers.

One of the men surrounding them pressed his rifle barrel against Heivia's cheek.

"The enemy of your enemy is…?"

"M-mwy fwiend! P-pwease wet us do thwis!! E-eh heh heh…"

Heivia was putting on the world's ugliest fake smile and seemed to be completely useless, so Quenser tried not to look at him.

The leader said, "The Deep Optical is a Second Generation Object specialized for naval battles and will likely become active around Oceania for the Capitalist Corporations' own interests once its current maintenance is complete. In other words, you have a reason to defeat it now."

"…And what is your reason?" asked Quenser. "If you just can't stand to have an Object stationed nearby, you would have the same complaint with our Baby Magnum. Why are you targeting the Deep Optical first?"

"Blank areas have their own issues to deal with," said the man. "I do not care if you believe us or not, but we have no reason to attack the Legitimacy Kingdom or the Baby Magnum. That is why we are asking for help. You can see our good intentions in the fact that we are not simply ordering you."

(Asking, hm?)

If anyone truly believed they were being asked while surrounded by a dozen men with rifles, they were either honest to a fault or they had some kind of fatal flaw in their personality.

"So has the Deep Optical done anything to make you want to attack it?"

"Explaining it would be simple enough." The man looked away from Quenser for an instant. "But it would be even simpler to show you."

Part 4

The horrid squall continued outside.

When they exited the wooden building, Quenser could tell they were in a cleared area of the forest with several similar buildings.

From the barbed wire surrounding the area and the wooden watchtowers, it was obvious at first glance that it was no normal facility.

Quenser and Heivia were led across the wet red clay and into a different building. They regretted looking inside the instant they did so.

The leader spoke from behind the two boys.

"The Deep Optical's actions have certain side effects."

The room was not exactly large and it was crowded with small beds.

They heard groans.

They saw bandages that looked anything but sanitary.

From the odd smell, self-grown medicinal herbs must have been used in place of disinfectant.

"The Capitalist Corporations has been carrying out missions within the Loyauté district in the name of eliminating armed forces and defending its maintenance base and infrastructure facilities. The Object goes to areas of the ocean around the islands and fires its cannons at the islands."

"…"

"We have heard that it is nothing more than an act to give the illusion of tension so that their sponsor company will provide them with additional national defense funding. Unlike you, they are not working to eliminate a clear enemy. They are merely firing their lasers into empty areas to fulfill a quota," said the leader plainly. "But it is firing lasers that belong to an Object, the weapon that is said to be more convenient and more powerful than a nuke. I hope I do not need to explain how much secondary damage is done by firing at a nonexistent enemy with such a weapon. As I said before, it is simplest to just show you."

Lying in the small beds were children with the same light brown skin as the leader.

The youngest was around 10 and the oldest was around 15. They had other aspects in common.

This was not a simple case of the children having bandages wrapped around them.

They were not whole.

They clearly missed things that whole people like Quenser had.

"We would like for you to stop this," said the man.

Perhaps because he could not resolve the situation on his own, there was a sadness in the man's voice.

"Could you please help destroy the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Object, the Deep Optical?"

Part 5

Quenser and Heivia left the wooden building.

The storm showed no sign of letting up.

Heivia sighed as the bottom of his boots sank uncomfortably into the wet red clay.

"Do you think we could run away now?"

"With guards carrying sniper rifles in those watchtowers? Even if we slipped past the guards, how far from the maintenance base are we? If they went mountain hunting in an off-road vehicle, they 'd catch up to us in no time."

"I know. I just had to ask. I guess we have to just wait for our huge-breasted commander. This group doesn't seem to be that large. A group of 10 foot soldiers armed with the latest weaponry

and a single attack helicopter for support would be able to handle them easily."

"They're not going to give us the time for that. And who knows if Froleytia will see ordering a search as a top priority."

"Then what do we do?" asked Heivia.

Quenser fell silent for a bit before saying, "Have you heard of the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation…Deep Optical was it?"

"Only our huge-breasted commander complaining about it. Once this leave of ours is over, it might be our next opponent. Officially, it is cooperating with the restoration of Oceania, but it has begun to go beyond that. Basically, it has begun to cause some small conflicts around the area of Oceania," replied Heivia. "It's completely unofficial, but our intelligence division has already begun reconnaissance on the Deep Optical. Of course, we can't let anyone know that is who we would be crushing next. They would be disciplined if they were caught."

"So as long as we aren't caught, doing some reconnaissance isn't an altogether bad idea."

"Quenser, are you serious?" asked Heivia in shock. Some slight fear could be seen hidden behind his expression. "This is an Object we're talking about. They're telling us to fight that monster! And they're having us do it at gunpoint!! I don't want to die for something like that! We're just normal humans!! We aren't super heroes who can shoot strange beams from our hands! This isn't a

difficult concept. We may not know exactly what kind of monster the Deep Optical is, but there is no doubt in my mind that fighting it would be hell. So wouldn't it be easier to survive this by using what power we have to deal with this armed group!?"

"…"

"We don't even know if we can get anywhere near this Object!! We aren't receiving proper support here. This armed group's information may be outdated and useless. They aren't going to have much in the way of weapons and equipment!! We won't have a strategy put together by an expert commander based on all sorts of data from an electronic simulation department!! And we don't have the protection of the Legitimacy Kingdom, so the theory of the clean battlefield does not hold here. If we raise our hands in surrender, they'll shoot us. If we're caught, the treaties regarding prisoners of war will not apply to us. Do you really understand what this means!?"

"I'm well aware this is not a normal situation." Quenser brushed aside his wet bangs in irritation. "But you saw that, didn't you, Heivia?"

"That isn't a reason." Heivia shook his head. "It's true a tragedy occurred here, but that is no reason to put our own lives in danger! I didn't join the army to be some hero of justice. It was to gain the valorous deeds I need as a noble. And you're a student who is only here to learn about Object design!! So shouldn't you be focusing your efforts elsewhere!?"

"Heivia." Quenser sighed softly. "If you truly felt that way, wouldn't you be working to escape on your own instead of arguing with me?"

"I…"

Quenser looked around and spotted a guard in a watchtower looking their way.

"Either way, we can't return to the maintenance base zone right now. And we need to face the Deep Optical eventually. So is it really that bad to get it over with now? And we even have the precedent to call it an unofficial recon mission."

"That may work for us personally," said Heivia in a tone that made it clear he was still not convinced. "But isn't that bad from the point of view of the organization as a whole? This will still be a military operation."

"I'm not a soldier, I'm a student."

"Tch. You always have that escape route that only works for you. Just so you know, that excuse isn't going to keep working forever."

"What do you say, Heivia?"

Heivia did not reply to Quenser's question for a while.

He muttered some things under his breath and hesitated for a while.

"I'll do it. God dammit, I'll do it!! But I'm not the only one heading into this hell!!" After shouting that, he lowered his tone of voice and panted as he spoke. "After all, I don't see any other option. And this is for those kids who lost an arm or a leg. I joined the army to earn medals and honor. This is a bit of a roundabout method, but a moving tale like this might be useful against my family."

(Okay.)

Now that they had made up their minds, they only needed to take their one-way ticket to hell from the grim reaper.

"Quenser, let's start by asking them if they have any weapons we can use. They captured us after we had finished our normal work and some overtime. Our equipment doesn't have enough ammunition for another mission."

"Yes," said Quenser.

Rare of an idiot like him, there was a clear note of killer intent in his voice.

"But first there is something else I need to ask them."

Part 6

When Quenser and Heivia said they accepted the request, the leader showed them to another wooden building.

Several metal containers were kept inside.

"You can use equipment and firearms from the Capitalist Corporations."

"?"

"The Deep Optical's maintenance unit is resupplied by air. Containers are dropped down by parachute. However, not all of them fall where they are supposed to. When the wind blows them off course, a third party can easily take them. But anything too high tech is not well suited for us."

"I see."

"If it's Capitalist Corporations stuff, this would be…damn…it's low-penetration 5.56 mm ammo. Well, whatever. Let's take a pair of uniforms while we're at it. I doubt it will completely fool them, but we'll be less likely to get shot than if we keep on these Legitimacy Kingdom uniforms."

"I hope we can find an explosive with similar properties to Hand Axe."

As the two muttered to each other, they opened the door of a container and pulled out the equipment they needed.

Naturally, the light brown men kept their rifles aimed at them the entire time.

However, there was a blind spot.

Specifically, behind the opened door of the container.

A clay-like explosive could be attached in such a way to send the fragments of the steel door towards the men.

(In 3 seconds.)

“Did you really think we would overlook your signs?” said the leader.

The surrounding men frantically adjusted their aim.

The leader narrowed his eyes and asked Quenser and Heivia, “ What do you think are you doing?”

“If I detonate this, you are the ones who will be blown away. And yes, I have made sure that the fragments and the blast will not touch us inside the container.”

“I asked you what you are doing,” repeated the leader calmly.

Even if Quenser and Heivia killed all of the people there, plenty of guards surrounded the facility. They would come running if there was an explosion and the two boys would certainly be cornered.

Quenser had no intention of running away by force.

“If I did not set up this farce, I doubt you would have answered my question. Especially because I want the raw truth rather than some disgusting whitewashed answer.”

"…What do you want to know?"

The leader had paused slightly before asking that.

He may have gotten a bad feeling about what the question was.

Quenser spoke without hesitation.

"Your claim is that those children lost limbs due to the Deep Optical's meaningless bombardments, right?"

"Yes, and?"

"Like hell they did," replied Heivia clearly. "Not even an old First Generation Object's bombardment is that easygoing. If someone was hit by a stray shot, they wouldn't even leave behind a proper corpse. There's no way an Object would cause so many injuries on a level that would cause pain in others more than even a corpse would."

"I don't know if you intercepted some radio transmission or you found out in some other way, but you knew the Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion was coming to the Loyauté district from a very early stage."

Quenser could feel his breaths growing shallow.

He was not controlling his emotions as well as he thought he could.

"And so you made them yourself. You made the materials you thought would get us to help you. If those injuries were not caused by an Object, then I can think of only one other cause."

He took a deep breath.

It did not help.

Even so, he continued on.

"You carved those children apart yourselves, didn't you?"

"…"

The leader remained silent for a bit.

Finally, he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Yes, we did."

"Why?" asked Quenser quietly. His voice then grew to a yell. "Were you that intent on having us take on the Deep Optical!? We're nothing more than a student and a foot soldier!! What value is there in setting up the Deep Optical as some horrible villain with some sob story!?"

"You understand nothing!!" shouted the leader as if to drive back Quenser's voice. "We have our reasons why we had to make this so simple to understand! Do not claim to understand how it feels to be forced to take a blade to the children who are supposed to be the next generation!!"

"What possible reason could-…"

"In reality, it is much worse than that!!"

Even the air in the room seemed to come to a standstill.

The leader continued speaking as he breathed heavily.

"Just as you said, an Object's stray shot does not leave even a corpse. But you do not understand. You have not seen the true effect the Deep Optical has been having on this land."

"So you made it visible because we couldn't see it?" groaned Heivia. "You were dragging us up to a level where we could discuss it by dropping it down to a level we could understand? Do you really think that justifies this?"

"Let me tell you up front. We never forced this on them. That tragedy was put together out of volunteers." The leader must have felt at least somewhat guilty because he began speaking more rapidly. "But there have been dozens or even hundreds of actual tragedies. They are still occurring even now in the Loyauté district. …If those wounds were enough to work up your anger, then you should be even more enraged over what is actually happening. Their atrocities have reached a level well beyond that."

"Fine then," muttered Quenser. "We're going to face the Deep Optical eventually. The only question is whether it is sooner or later. Of course, that difference could decide whether we get rewarded or punished for it, but I will turn a blind eye to that. Just don't think this is going to have a happy ending."

"…"

"Whatever your reasons may have been, you did what you did. Do not forget that the day will come when you must pay for it."

Part 7

And so Quenser and Heivia were finally able to leave that area of red clay surrounded by barbed wire.

The two of them walked through a thick jungle while wearing Capitalist Corporations military uniforms and armed with Capitalist Corporations weapons. The continuing squall had created small rivers of water between the trees and they tried to leave as little trace of their passing as they could as they walked through those rivers.

"We aren't getting paid for this. There are no beautiful women around. And yet we're being told to go fight a Second Generation Object with nothing but puny rifles."

"Yes, but our savings here will let us go nuts once the day of swimsuits arrives."

After chatting a bit, the two boys lowered the tones of their voices.

"What do you think?"

"They aren't just going to let us run off. They're watching us from a distance. We could probably spot a few of them, but we

have no way of knowing if we've spotted them all. The locals would probably know better how to hide around here than we would."

"They can keep an eye on us all they like, but if they don't tell us where they are, we'll have to deal with them as soldiers of unknown affiliation if we spot them."

Since Froleytia was not watching over them, Quenser had a relatively low-recoil 9mm submachine gun hanging from a sling belt.

"What's wrong with that?" said Heivia who was more used to the smell of gun oil than Quenser. "If we make a mistake, we make a mistake. …To be honest, I have no intention of protecting them. If we accidentally shoot one of them, I can only see it as one less annoyance we have to deal with."

There was a great difference in the extent of their actions, but Quenser and Heivia may have been as much outsiders as the Deep Optical was.

However, Quenser and Heivia could hardly be blamed for having a bad impression of the locals from the beginning.

"How far until we reach the destination?"

"15 kilometers. But we have this torrential rain and wet red clay to deal with. A normal vehicle wouldn't be able to get through and

something with too much horsepower would make too much noise. …If only we had something with a powerful electric engine. ”

“With the weather the way it is, the enemy probably doesn’t want to be out in it either. The patrol routes are set in stone in the documents, but the actual soldiers may not be covering them properly.”

“Let’s pray they’re watching a 3D porn movie or something in the checkpoint log house. When it isn’t gonna get you paid any more, heading out with the possibility of getting caught in a landslide just to be on the lookout for enemy soldiers who probably aren’t even coming will do nothing but earn you an early grave.”

Their commander Froleytia would have hated to hear that, but that was how people felt in the age of the clean battlefield filled with Objects.

“Our goal is the Deep Optical, not the maintenance base. We can’t sit around here forever, so let’s get a move on. We can’t spend too long on just the first step.”

“Heivia,” said Quenser as he looked down at the ground.

With a look of confusion, Heivia said, “What? Are you worried about the footprints you’re leaving in the mud? Don’t be so worried. They’ll be washed away 10 minutes from now.”

“No, not that. …I think I see some kind of box sticking up.”

"Ahn?"

Heivia looked back down where Quenser was looking and spotted something made of plastic sticking up from the red clay mud. It was a box about the size of a computer's AC adapter.

"…Not good. Isn't that an anti-personnel landmine? And it's one of the horrible nonmetal types. It can escape detection by a magnetic mine detector."

"They didn't tell us about this! If there are mines, they should tell us!!"

Of course, mines were meaningless if not hidden. But if you did not set them up so that you knew where they were, you would end up blowing your own leg off.

That was why the trees would normally have some kind of sign on them or the area would be divided into a safe zone and a dangerous zone. However…

"It's this rain. Some of the mines must have been swept away from the signs."

"So no one knows where they are? And we have to walk 15 kilometers through this!?"

"It's probably not even worth reporting for them. And that includes any legs that might be blown off," said Heivia in disgust.

"What ever happened to the modern battlefield being a clash between two Objects? Why are they using landmines that blow off people's legs? Where did that clean battlefield go?"

As he spoke, Heivia reached for the switch to the sensors on his assault rifle.

Quenser frowned.

"I thought you said a mine detector wouldn't work?"

"I said the magnetic ones wouldn't work."

"So we die when the sensor's batteries die…"

With Heivia in the lead, the two boys headed on into the forest.

Thanks to the tremendous squall, there were few bugs, but the chill of early morning disappeared as time went on. All that was left was the horrid heat of a bath with a broken ventilation fan.

As expected, the Capitalist Corporations soldiers were not performing their guard duties with much enthusiasm. Footprints might be washed away, but the tire tracks of trucks did not disappear so quickly. However, they saw very few of those.

"Everything is soaking wet. Who knows what areas could crumble under our feet."

"With the risk of landmines and landslides, it's no surprise they don't want to go out on patrol. Everyone wants to shove any dangerous work on the Objects and the Elites that pilot them."

Heivia looked down at a Capitalist Corporations handheld device that contained only the bare minimum of data.

"I think we just passed the defensive line for the outermost checkpoint."

The area seemed more like a mountain than a forest.

The slope of the ground made the rainwater flow even faster past their feet.

Quenser pulled a clear bag out of a pocket of his waterproof military uniform.

"Dammit, Capitalist Corporations rations are actually good. This one tastes like Salisbury steak."

"Stop it. Getting too excited will just make it worse when we get back. …Wait."

Quenser and Heivia stopped moving and slowly crouched down.

The trees of the forest and the pouring rain of the squall made it hard to tell but there were some figures hiding behind some thick tree trunks about 300 meters ahead.

From what they could see, there were 3 of them.

As they were all wearing the same uniform and armed with the same guns, they were likely all part of the same unit.

They were all women, but that may have had something to do with their unit.

It was unlikely they would be able to hear him from that distance, but Quenser still whispered as he spoke to Heivia.

"(It doesn't look like they've noticed us. Are they from the Capitalist Corporations?)"

"(No. Look at their guns. They're from the Faith Organization. And those are short-range sniper rifles…)"

"(Short-range sniper rifles?)"

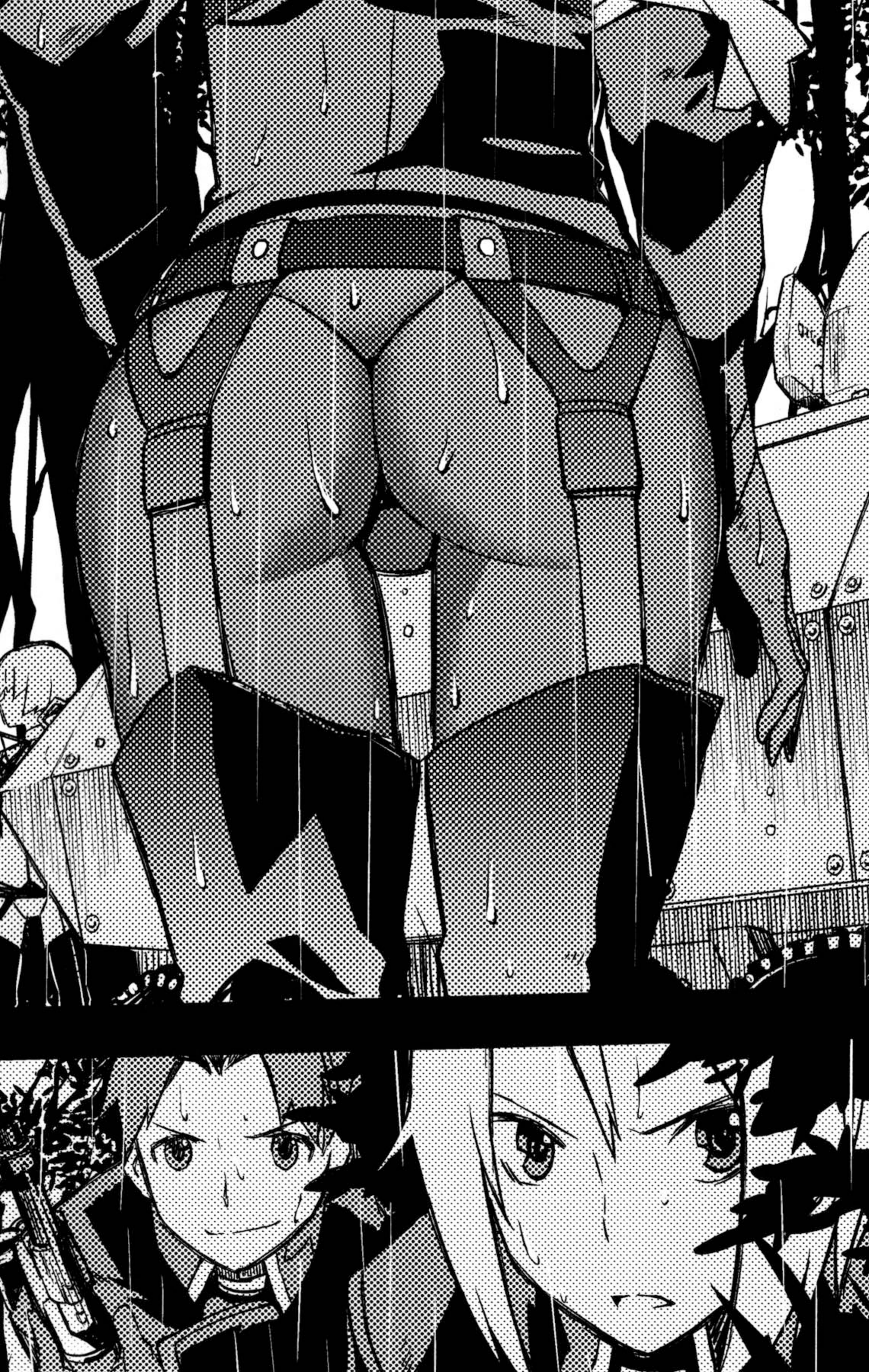
"(They're for shooting robbers who have taken hostages in an urban setting. Their penetrative power is purposefully kept low so the bullet won't cause any damage to the surroundings after hitting someone.)"

"(If the bullet stays in the target's body, couldn't you also say it's designed to make the wound as bad as possible?)"

One of the distant figures turned its head in their direction.

Quenser and Heivia could not move carelessly. Even the smallest movement on their part would cause a surprisingly large movement in the underbrush around them. The squall was still pouring down heavily, but an unnatural movement would still stand out.

"(But where are they expecting urban warfare to take place? In a safe country?)"



"(They must not be a military group. My guess is they're some kind of police special forces. Maybe they're the group known as Valkyrie. That's a global divine punishment group that goes around to various Faith Organization owned areas and eliminates those who breaks religious rules. They use specialized equipment and the group is entirely made up of women.)"

"(Valkyrie, hm? It looks like they're wearing something like a garter belt over their uniform…and is that a shell cup bra? A bra that doesn't actually cover up the breasts is kind of getting your priorities backwards, isn't it? Are they wearing that for some kind of ideological reason?)"

"(It's probably just the tastes of the higher ups. Dammit, it's a shame they're from the Faith Organization. That is one nice ass.)"

"(You should probably stop that. Valkyrie is basically the enforcer of public morals in the Faith Organization. I get the feeling they wouldn't appreciate jokes like that.)"

"(That depends on their specific religious sect. If they worship a god of fertility or a mother goddess, they can be rather proactive about sleeping around a lot. The stories about the Greek Dionysus are pretty amazing.)"

"(…So they're police rather than soldiers, hm?)"

Soldiers left all the fighting to Objects while the police often had shootouts in urban areas. This meant it was entirely possible that a police officer working in a safe country would be more skilled than a soldier.

"(Why are they here?)"

"(Well, I doubt they're working with the Capitalist Corporations. They wouldn't be sneaking around like that if they were.)"

"(They do tend to not get along with the Capitalist Corporations who try to use religion for nothing more than to make money or the Information Alliance who use the internet to publish scientific analyses of traditional stories.)"

The woman who appeared to be the leader of the three Valkyries had some kind of cloth wrapped around her arm. It was possible they had already had a few run-ins with the Capitalist Corporations soldiers. Either that or they had other enemies.

Quenser calmly observed them.

"(But they aren't allies of the Legitimacy Kingdom either. We could end up in a firefight if we aren't careful.)"

"(It would be difficult to take them out here.)"

The three they could see already outnumbered them and there could be more hiding. Also, gunshots would likely draw in the Capitalist Corporations soldiers protecting the Deep Optical.

Heivia slowly held up his rifle.

"(Hopefully, we can get past them without being noticed.)"

One of the figures gave instructions to the other two with a gesture.

The two subordinate women silently moved out of a short thicket.

"(Slowly, slowly. Good, they're leaving. Damn. Now the trees are in the way and I can't target them.)"

After the two subordinates moved on ahead, the third figure headed after them.

They were headed in a different direction from Quenser and Heivia. They either had no business with the Deep Optical or were circling around using a different route.

"(Looks like they've gone.)"

Just as Quenser was wiping away some of the rainwater running down his chin, one of the figures stopped and looked back around the area.

"!"

"(Wait, Heivia!!)"

Quenser called out to stop Heivia as his trigger finger twitched.

The figure remained still for a bit, but finally disappeared into the forest.

"(Looks like we made it.)"

"(What is Valkyrie doing here anyway?)"

Heivia's question was a good one, but they had no time to think about it.

Deep Optical was enough of an issue on its own.

Part 8

As Quenser and Heivia headed further into the forest, the ground grew sloped. The water from the pouring squall caused enough resistance to obstruct their path somewhat.

"What ever happened to the blue ocean and white beach?"

"You complained about that same thing back when we were dealing with Hyena."

"It just pisses me off to think the rest of the unit is having a nice vacation while we're trudging through the mud."

As they chatted, a red dot of light appeared on Heivia's chest.

It was the laser sight of a sniper rifle.

He held his hands up and the red light disappeared.

"…I guess that was a warning from our guards. God dammit."

"Are they listening to us with the microphones on their rifles?"

(Idiots,) thought Quenser in his heart.

In the pouring rain, the light of the laser could be seen by the naked eye from the side as well as straight on. It may have made the armed group seem to be in complete control, but it also gave an opportunity for a counterattack.

"We really would have been in trouble if they had given us one of those warnings while Valkyrie was nearby."

"We can only hope they're smart enough not to do that."

While being mindful of the unseen gun barrels, they continued on toward the Capitalist Corporations maintenance base zone.

As they came to a spot that was more of a hill than a cliff, Heivia realized something.

"Oh, crap."

"What?"

"Look down at the bottom of the cliff. There're some Capitalist Corporations soldiers."

Quenser checked too while hiding behind a tree trunk.

They were at the top of a cliff only a few meters high and the Capitalist Corporations soldiers were at the bottom. An electric armored vehicle was stopped in an old dry riverbed that had a new stream of muddy water flowing through it. Two or three foot soldiers were gathered around it.

"It looks like they're delivering ammo or batteries. The high energy use is a major problem with modern equipment. I guess there are some willing to head out into this squall."

"Do you think we can take them?"

"They don't know we're here, but it would still be tough. But that armored vehicle worries me. Look at all the sensors on its roof . After the delivery, I bet it's going to head out on a patrol to do a thorough scan of the forest."

"So we have to do something," said Quenser. "But starting a firefight would just bring more soldiers here. Blowing up the armored vehicle would be even worse. Who knows how far the sound would spread."

"Then we just have to do it naturally, Quenser." Heivia pointed at the wet soil beneath his feet. "Naturally."

Part 9

A Valkyrie member named Sarasa Gleamshifter moved silently through the forest. The rainwater that had gotten inside the cloth wrapped tightly around her right arm was making the wound on

that arm hurt, but her expression did not change in the slightest. However, she was on her guard. The slightest scent of blood could lead carnivorous animals to her and that could in turn gather the enemy soldiers' attention.

Sarasa suddenly stopped.

She had heard the loud noise of a dirt wall collapsing. She then heard various transmissions being sent back and forth coming from the device she was using to intercept Capitalist Corporations radio transmissions.

"A landslide to the southwest. It seems a Capitalist Corporations armored vehicle and soldiers were caught up in it," reported her subordinate Rachel.

"I heard them," snapped back Sarasa.

Their objective was not the Capitalist Corporations; it was an old man named Oldnick who had fled to the area. However, they had not bothered getting permission for their search, so a firefight would break out should the Capitalist Corporations spot them. For that reason, nothing could be better than to have the Capitalist Corporations soldiers' attention focused elsewhere. However…

Sarasa Gleamshifter did not simply give in to this good fortune.

It made her feel uncomfortable and raise her guard.

She sensed the cause of this uncomfortable feeling via her nose.

They were located downwind of the landslide.

"…I smell explosives," muttered Sarasa. "And this isn't from gun ammunition. This is the smell after some form of plastic explosive has been detonated."

After thinking for a bit, Sarasa gave some instructions via gestures.

They would determine the cause.

They were a Faith Organization special unit that was sent around the world to deal with those known as "enemies of god" who had broken the rules of their religion. Due to the actions of their target that had fled there, they had no choice but to immediately pursue. The old man was trying to spread twisted treasures throughout the world that were in opposition to god's providence, so they had to punish him no matter what.

And any irregular elements that got in the way of their pursuit would be eliminated even if said irregular element's actions had nothing to do with the target.

The Capitalist Corporations soldiers had likely gathered at the point of the landslide by then.

Valkyrie circled around that area as they headed for the direction from which the explosion had occurred. After about half an hour, they arrived at their destination.

The Capitalist Corporations soldiers were attempting to save their comrades at the bottom of the cliff, while Valkyrie was at the top of the collapsed cliff.

Sarasa crouched down and touched the dirt with her hand.

(The surface is wet, but it is much harder deeper down. And the quality of the dirt is even. A landslide would not normally occur here.)

She could see no footprints in the area, but the squall would have soon washed away any that were there.

Sarasa Gleamshifter searched around for any other traces and clicked her tongue when she spotted something unpleasant about 10 meters away.

A Capitalist Corporations first aid kit was placed among the tree branches such that it was just at eyelevel. The plastic bag to an eaten package of rations had been placed over it to keep out the effects of the squall.

"…"

Sarasa looked down at her right arm.

She didn't know who, but someone had noticed them. And whoever it was had caused that landslide, so they were not from the Capitalist Corporations.

After careful observation to ensure it was not a trap, Sarasa confirmed that it was nothing more than a first aid kit. This brought her anger to its peak.

Leaving behind the first aid kit showed whoever it was was looking down on her even more than someone giving a piece of candy to a small child.

"Damn you!!"

Sarasa knocked the first aid kit to the ground and searched further into the forest.

However, she spotted something else unpleasant 5 meters in.

It was a trap using wires.

It was a simple type that activated with a tripwire. Sharpened wooden stakes were set on a well-bent branch so that they would attack their prey with tremendous speed.

However, there was an electronic fuse set at one end of the wire.

The fuse was normally used to set off some other explosive by causing an exceedingly small explosion.

However, it could also be used to sever a wire remotely.

"Shit…!?"

However, cursing was not going to stop the fuse.

This enemy would kill her if she made an enemy of them.

They were not so benevolent that they would continue to show compassion to one who had turned aside their previous show of kindness.

Part 10

Quenser and Heivia were observing her through their rifles' scopes.

"Oh, shit! She's still alive! Damn is she ever still alive!! Oh, god. Why do girls' personalities change so much when they're angry!?"

"So she didn't accept. Well, I doubt she can track us down from this distance."

They had carried out the explosion that caused the landslide after already getting a good distance away. It seemed the Faith Organization's Valkyrie was trying to hunt them down with a demonic expression on her face, but finding them would not be easy where they were.

However…

"…What is this indescribable chill? I get the feeling we should start running away just to be absolutely sure."

"A woman's grudge is a scary thing. If only they weren't so bewitchingly beautiful."

After that sidetrack with a Faith Organization opponent that had not been stated on any concrete information, the two boys got back to their actual mission.

After walking for a bit longer and crossing a small mountain, they spotted their objective.

Over half a day had already passed since they had left the headquarters of that armed group.

"So that's the Capitalist Corporations maintenance base for the Deep Optical."

Instead of the convoy used for a Legitimacy Kingdom base, the forest had been cleared out and actual buildings had been constructed. The buildings were mostly made of the thin, light metal often used in prefabs.

"…I'm surprised they went this far. Just keeping the area deforested must take a lot of work. The vegetation around here is extremely fertile, so the base would be overrun before long if they left it alone."

"I see burned spots here and there, so maybe they're burning it away."

In the base was a single building made of thick concrete that was much, much larger than the rest.

It was likely the Object's maintenance building.

While taking a broad view of the base, Heivia said, "I thought it was a Second Generation specialized for naval battles. Why would they build the base in the middle of the jungle?"

"It uses an air cushion, so it might be able to move throughout the island while it's flooded from this squall. We would have to see it ourselves to know for sure, though."

"…I'd rather deal with it before it heads out again," said Heivia as he shed an unpleasant sweat that was distinct from the squall's rainwater. "Even if it can't move, it's still an Object. If it notices us, it'll aim its countless cannons directly at us."

"That's what we're sneaking around to avoid…although this is going to be a real pain."

As Quenser spoke, Heivia observed the area around the maintenance base through his rifle's scope.

"It doesn't look like we can sneak in easily. The guards near the base are actually doing their job. I guess they're more likely to get caught with the higher ups so nearby. I don't think we can sneak in without anyone noticing."

"If that was possible, the armed group would have already done so. They know the terrain better than us."

Since the armed group had apparently never succeeded, it must have truly been impossible.

"From what I can see, the guards in different areas wear different color armbands. The guards outside the base and inside it are wearing different armbands. Even someone from the Capitalist Corporations will immediately be suspected if they're wearing the wrong color."

And of course, the armbands would be more than simple pieces of cloth.

They likely had a magnetic tape or IC chip that contained electronic information.

"It's possible the inside of the base is divided up by sections that use different colors. If so, we'll still be in trouble even if we get in safely."

As expected, getting in was not as simple as wearing a Capitalist Corporations military uniform. This was a base protecting an Object that cost 5 billion dollars. Plus, they were not on a clean battlefield. This was an area with armed groups. They would make sure not to leave any openings.

"That means…"

"We need to find an 'unseen opening'."

And so the two boys pulled out a directional microphone.

Part 11

After sunset, Quenser and Heivia remained still as the rain continued to pour down on them in the jungle.

They were pointing a special microphone that was shaped like a handgun toward the base.

With the headphone in his ear, Heivia moved the microphone over toward the officer's rooms.

"That won't get you anything, Heivia."

"Ahn? But listening in on the officers would be fastest to get information on the base."

"The people who know the value of the information will make sure they aren't bugged. They'll have a gap in the wall with a vacuum in it to keep the sound from getting out and the windows will have motors attached to vibrate them."

"Then what do we do?"

"If we can't go straight to the source, we have to try a more roundabout method. We target the soldiers on patrol."

"I doubt we'll get much information from what they say."

"No, not from one. But that changes when we listen in on dozens or even hundreds of them. If we bring all the small pieces of information together, we might gain some bigger piece of information about the base as a whole."

And so they continued their remote bugging and jotted down every little thing they heard that they thought could be useful in any way. The rain prevented them from using paper, and they had to avoid using a handheld device because of the backlight. They were forced to use permanent markers to write the information down on the insides of their waterproof military uniforms.

"If we don't hurry up, maintenance will finish on the Deep Optical."

"Dammit. Capitalist Corporations rations really are good."

While they occasionally quietly spoke to each other, dawn came , the sun passed overhead beyond the thick rainclouds, and darkness came once more. All the while, they gathered small bits of information.

"Hm, the maintenance building is ceramic compressed using quick-dry concrete. An Object cannon could easily handle it, but it could probably stand up to four or five shots from a normal tank."

"God, these Capitalist Corporations rations are good…"

"When the hell did you make a class change to a gourmet character? And quit eating them all! Leave some for me!!"

This lasted for about two days.

Quenser and Heivia took turns taking quick naps in the pouring rain while leaning up against a tree trunk as they continued to pick up on the faint voices.

Before the second dawn, Quenser gave voice to the fruit of their labors.

"The Shadow Code."

Part 12

All the while, others were monitoring Quenser and Heivia.

These were the snipers of the armed group that had asked them to destroy the Deep Optical. They were hiding beneath ghillie suits created from old rags sliced up with a knife and then covered with multiple layers of different colors of spray paint. They were getting tired of watching Quenser and Heivia sit around doing nothing.

What were they doing?

That was the question all of the guards were asking. The two boys had approached the maintenance base zone well enough, but now they showed no sign of taking even one more step.

The snipers had been impressed when the two boys had dealt with the Capitalist Corporations armored vehicle in the landslide, but they were getting irritated since the two boys had accomplished nothing since. The snipers wondered if they had been overcome with fear upon seeing the maintenance base zone.

The armed group knew bits and pieces of Quenser and Heivia's past activities from news sites, but they knew nothing of the methods used. They simply assumed the two boys would head to

the battlefield and that would be that. They had assumed the situation would be resolved within the day once the two boys headed out. That was how they had viewed Quenser and Heivia.

This was nothing more than the process that led to people complaining about athletes simply "having more talent". These people had no idea how much hard work and effort the athletes had put into it all because the people had merely seen biased and summarized information of the athletes' results.

However, a further problem existed here. These snipers had sniper rifles they could use to shoot Quenser and Heivia at any time.

What would they do?

Would they continue watching or would they act?

The snipers of the armed group gave it careful thought. It would be simple enough to decide that Quenser and Heivia had chickened out, but firing that close to the maintenance base zone could easily bring danger to the snipers. And if they killed Quenser and Heivia, the Deep Optical would remain. The efforts of the "volunteer" children used to create the needed situation would all be for naught.

(Just a warning should be enough.)

A warning using the laser sight was relatively low risk when compared to actually firing a shot. However, they had used that method once already. The more they used it, the less of a psychological effect it would have.

What should they do?

As his patience wore down, one of the snipers continued to think.

That may have been why he did not notice something else.

A different shadow was silently closing in from behind him.

Part 13

Quenser and Heivia sorted through the information they had.

They had discovered a possible way in.

"Their commander has a certain item known as the Shadow Code brought in through a separate route from normal supplies. Well, I do understand why he would be worried about that."

"This Shadow Code doesn't go through the standard route. It isn't brought in with the other supplies, and it isn't officially authorized. That would leave behind data the commander would prefer not be there."

"The secret transporters have an implicit understanding with the soldiers of the maintenance base." Quenser went over the conditions one at a time. "That means the secret transporters can get through the base without worrying about the sections divided up by armband."

They knew what items they needed to sneak into the base.

Just as Quenser and Heivia were about to take action, they heard a rustling in the underbrush directly behind them.

"!?"

But the noise came from too close behind them.

Quenser and Heivia frantically tried to turn around, but the attacker charged over at Quenser's side.

"Quen-…!!"

Heivia cried out and tried to aim his rifle over, but he froze in place.

He had noticed two short-range sniper rifle barrels aiming at him from two different directions.

"You are not from the Capitalist Corporations. …Your equipment is made to look like it, but I see no reason why you would be hiding and spying on your own base," said the attacker who was straddling Quenser.

It was a low, female voice.

When he saw her, Heivia brought a hand to his face.

"(Trade with me, Quenser!! Why is it always you!?)"

"(Are you saying you *want* a knife pressed against your throat!?)"

"That accent… So you're from the Legitimacy Kingdom." The attacker let some of her weight off of Quenser, but the knife blade remained at his throat. "What are you doing here?"

"So was the first aid kit not enough of a clue to stay out of this?"

"Shut it, kid. You may be trying to sound cool, but it just makes you sound immature. Answer my question."

"What about you? What reason does Valkyrie of the Faith Organization have to let us live?"

Quenser was referring to the fact that they could have simply shot him and Heivia from a distance.

No matter how many weapons the women had, the fact that they had needlessly approached showed that they were not all that intent on killing them. And if they simply wanted to use blades to avoid loud gunshots, Quenser's throat would have already been slit.

"A slight bit of thanks." The Valkyrie woman then got up off of Quenser. "That last one hurt, though."

"So what do you want?"

"If my judgment is accurate, you are about to attack the Capitalist Corporations maintenance base."

The Valkyrie woman gave a thin smile.

It was most certainly not a smile of friendship.

"We are searching for an enemy of god that has fled to this area. However, they are in our way. If you are going to be causing them some trouble, we can use that. We simply wish to know when it will take place."

"You are willing to ask the Legitimacy Kingdom for help?"

"You are better than the Capitalist Corporations or the Information Alliance. The Legitimacy Kingdom's ceremonies such as the coronation are often based on religious ceremonies. …But more importantly, you are neither enemies of god nor are you obstructing our search. For now at least."

"(Damn. I'm glad I didn't make a crude joke when she climbed on top of me.)"

Even as Quenser felt a bit of quiet relief, another aspect worried him.

Quenser and Heivia were being monitored by the local armed group to prevent them from running off. Making contact with a unit from a world power could be seen as preparations to flee. It was possible they would be shot from afar.

When she noticed Quenser's eyes racing around the surroundings, the Valkyrie woman said, "You do not need to worry about them."

"?"

"We eliminated the others. We will use those who can be useful, but we have no reason to spare the ones who are of no use or who will hinder us later."

Quenser heard a clanking noise.

The Valkyrie woman pulled out several scopes. They all had broken lenses and a dark red liquid splattered on the side.

"Would fingers or ears have functioned better as proof?"

"…"

He had known the woman was bad news before, but Quenser felt a chill run down his spine once more.

No matter how he thought about it, they were clearly enemies.

They would not be their allies.

He was also amazed at their ability to eliminate all of the snipers who had been hidden in the jungle.

He started to wish he and Heivia had gone further with the traps earlier.

"(Quenser. Hey, Quenser!!)"

"(What, Heivia?)"

"(If the guards from the armed group are gone, can't we just run away now? We don't have to go after the Capitalist Corporations Object!!)"

Heivia had a point.

With those guards killed, the armed group would take some other action. It was possible they would decide Quenser and Heivia had betrayed them and send out an additional unit.

However…

If they did nothing about the Deep Optical, more disasters on a scale too large to see would occur in the Loyauté district.

That armed group might once more use children as a shield in negotiations with someone else. And if that did not work, they might do something even worse

And most importantly…

"(Are we really free to leave?)"

"(What do you mean?)"

"(Do you think Valkyrie took the risk to approach us for nothing? They're hoping to use us. So if we refuse…)"

"Dammit," groaned Heivia.

The Valkyrie woman could hear everything they were whispering, but she was letting it all go.

"So what exactly is your plan?" expressionlessly asked the woman who made the decision to kill based on whether the person could be of use to her or not. "I do not care what you are trying to do, but the bigger the disturbance and the longer it lasts, the better for us. If you need anything, just ask."

"Well…" said Quenser as he concentrated on keeping his breathing regulated. "We need some bottles. I'll tell you the brand, but they can be empty. You can probably find them in their trash. Also…"

Not only was Valkyrie surprised at what Quenser said, but so was Heivia.

Looking puzzled, the Valkyrie woman asked, "Is that really all you need?"

"We don't have much equipment. We don't even have that."

"Understood," she said, accepting his request. She then lowered her voice. "But if you are captured by the Capitalist Corporations,

do not speak of us. If you do, we will thoroughly research who you are, infiltrate your safe country, and kill every one of your relatives."

"You don't need to threaten us. We don't even really know if you're from Valkyrie or not. We aren't who our uniforms say we are either."

"Very well then." The Valkyrie woman gave a wicked smile that almost seemed to be blasphemous in itself. "You two do as you wish. If we can make use of it, we will."

Part 14

Quenser and Heivia's strategy was not all that thoroughly planned out.

They directly approached the small gate while trying to stand out as little as possible.

"Wait a second. Stop. Yes, you two over there."

When they arrived at the gate, an amplified voice called out from over 100 meters ahead. A giant light near the gate shined on them and an off-road vehicle equipped with a machine gun approached.

Two soldiers got out of the vehicle as it idled.

They wore the same Capitalist Corporations uniforms as Quenser and Heivia and had the same assault rifle as Heivia.

Quenser covered his face with one hand to block the bright light .

"Hey, stop that. You're gonna give me a headache."

"Are you with the unit?" One of the soldiers stared at Quenser and Heivia's uniforms. "What are you doing here? It isn't time for the night shift patrols to return. And where are your armbands? You should have one on your right arm."

"We can't wear them since we're on a job that doesn't allow it," replied Heivia quietly.

"What?"

The soldier frowned.

Heivia leaned in close to the soldier and whispered, "It's in both of our interests to end this discussion about the armbands. Surely you've heard of the commander's Shadow Code."

"Oh, that…"

The soldier looked away from Quenser and Heivia with a bitter expression.

He was looking over at what the two boys were transporting.

It was a handcart.

The soldier used an LED flashlight to peer inside the canopy. Quenser spoke up to him from behind.

"Don't shine the light on it too much. It's like tea in that light can destroy the composition without even opening it."

"Oh, I see. But…dammit." The soldier groaned and turned off the flashlight. "So the commander is ordering diet drinks again!?"

"He uses the ridiculous name Shadow Code, so no one knows what it is. We have to work our asses off all day while he's eating and drinking enough that he has to worry about getting too fat. It pisses me off, but that's just how the world works."

"Our 4WD vehicle got stuck in the mud. Normally, we would have called for help, but we can't given what we're carrying. Thanks to that, we had to stay out this late trudging through the mud. We're supposed to be part of the day shift, so I want to get to bed already."

The soldier clicked his tongue.

He must have felt it would be best not to cause a commotion, so he gestured to have the bright light from the gate shut off.

"Understood. Head through. The night shift can get a bit on edge, so try not to stand out once you get inside."

"Will do."

"You aren't the only ones who will be in trouble if that doesn't reach the commander."

The soldiers moved the barricade made of a metal framework and barbed wire and then opened the steel gate. Quenser and Heivia pushed the handcart into the maintenance base while everyone watched on.

"(What do we do now?)"

"(If we managed to get into the Object maintenance building like this, we would be better off defecting to the Capitalist Corporations and becoming Hollywood stars. We need to head to the barracks to borrow some armbands. We need to make sure we won't look suspicious around the maintenance building.)"

"(The armbands are divided up by color, right?)"

"(A beautiful woman's ass is one thing, but I wouldn't spend dozens of hours staring at these boring muscular men for no reason. I know what color toothpaste they use.)"

Meanwhile, the two boys headed through a few different sections of the base.

Occasionally, a powerful light from a watchtower would move towards them and they would start sweating, but the circle of light would humorously move away the instant it touched their handcart. It seemed the base truly did have an implicit understanding.

They stopped the cart behind the barracks in a spot the watchtowers could not see, but no voice called out to challenge

them. They then slowly opened one of the windows lined up on the barracks wall.

Of course, the window would normally be locked and would have sensors.

"All the information is proving accurate. When the Shadow Code reaches the gate, they secretly unlock one of the windows."

Just to be sure, they removed one of the diet drink bottles from the cart as a good luck charm and climbed into the barracks.

It was nothing but one of the empty bottles Valkyrie had procured with filthy, germ-filled jungle water in it, but no one was going to double check the contents even if they found it suspicious.

People had a lot of complexes about diet drinks. If the commander thought someone was giving it undue attention, he could very well hold a grudge.

"Y'know, if we actually delivered them to the commander, he might get food poisoning and the base's chain of command would come crumbling down."

"They would just stick someone else in charge. Directly targeting the Deep Optical is still our best bet."

The two boys chose a room in the barracks to enter.

They of course chose their target from the name plate for the room.

All the data they had gathered was enough to know what that person's duty was and that no one would be inside at that time.

Quenser and Heivia quickly started digging through the belongings inside to find the armbands they needed.

"Each individual person doesn't have just one armband! Counting spares, they're given three! We just need to find the right color!!"

"Which color!?"

"Blue or green! Blue is for the guards and green is for the technicians!!"

Given how Quenser and Heivia were dressed the blue for a guard would be more natural. Also, the person who stayed in that room was a guard.

"Maybe we should change out of these soaking wet uniforms into new ones."

"We're not officers. You don't see regular soldiers walking around with an umbrella. More importantly, we need those armbands! Dammit. Are we not just going to find blue or green ones around!?"

Suddenly, Quenser and Heivia heard approaching footsteps.

"(Shit. This is bad, Quenser.)" Heivia lowered his voice to a whisper. "(We can't find the armbands. It'll look suspicious to stop by here with a diet drink! We're cornered!! Anywhere we go is a dead end!!)"

The footsteps continued.

They were clearly headed for the room they were in.

Quenser suddenly spoke up.

"(Heivia, hand me the diet drink bottle.)"

"(What?)"

"(We have nowhere to hide!! We just have to keep doing what we've been doing, so just hand it over!)"

Heivia tossed the bottle and Quenser caught it in one hand. Quenser then wrapped a new uniform jacket and the one he already had around the bottle.

The door opened without a knock as he was doing so.

A middle aged man wearing an expensive-looking uniform that seemed ill suited to actual combat looked at them suspiciously. He had quite a heavy-set build like the type of soldier that simply drew arrows on maps. To be blunt, he was the type of officer the bottom-rung soldiers would dislike.

"What are you doing here? Is this your room?"

"W-we're hiding. We have our reasons."

The middle-aged man clicked his tongue in annoyance when he saw the item Quenser was trying to hide

"If you've arrived, then hurry up and deliver them. If they are on the base, we can't have the delivery seen as incomplete. …Also, even if this is the Shadow Code, make sure to return what you used for packaging."

Quenser and Heivia passed by the middle-aged man's side and attempted to quickly leave the room.

He called out to them.

"Wait."

"…Do you need something?"

"Since you have it here, we can open just the one now, right? We're just eating rations, so we need to look after our health too."

Quenser almost jumped.

The bottle was filled with filthy jungle water.

"We…"

"We?"

"We aren't overweight enough for it to be worth opening it."

"If you say so…"

"W-well, we'll be going."

The middle-aged man gave a slightly bitter smile and waved Quenser and Heivia off like he was shooing away a dog.

Heivia breathed a sigh of relief upon exiting the room.

"…We're safe for now, but what do we do now?"

"Good question."

"We can't hang around forever with nothing but the diet drinks. Also, that old man is in the room we thought we could find the armbands in. Without green or blue armbands, we can't approach the Deep Optical's maintenance building. If we can't do that, getting in the base was meaningless."

It was possible they could find the armbands they needed in other rooms, but they had no information to base it on. Searching over a hundred rooms would take time and it would seem suspicious. More importantly, they would be unable to avoid a fight if they accidentally opened the door of a soldier who was on break.

If that happened, they would never survive.

"If only there was a way to destroy the Deep Optical without touching it."

"Ahn?"

"Heivia, let's go back over the information we gathered with the directional microphone over the past 2 days. What maintenance is the Deep Optical undergoing?"

As Quenser spoke, they headed back to the window with the security deactivated in order to leave the barracks.

"If we know that, we might be able to find something we can do ."

Part 15

"The Deep Optical is a Second Generation Object using a laser beam for its main cannon," said Heivia as they left the barracks through the window and hid behind the handcart. "But that main cannon is a tricky one. Eight excitation lasers are used in conjunction with a liquid prism for the stimulated emission, but if the refractive index within the liquid is off even slightly, the laser beam will tear the main cannon apart."

"And the maintenance is related to that?"

"I think they're defragging the electronic control program that automatically regulates the density of the liquid in the liquid prism . It seems software problems will crop up periodically. Their method of dealing with that seems to be to perform frequent maintenance of the memory clusters."

"…"

"Oh, but don't get your hopes up. There is absolutely no way stopping this maintenance could make the Deep Optical blow to pieces," said Heivia just to make sure. "As I said, this is nothing but software maintenance. If we interfered with work on the JPlevelMHD reactor, even foot soldiers like us might be able to blow up the Deep Optical, but this is just the program controlling the main cannon. It isn't enough to blow it up."

Of course, the Object had around 100 other cannons at its disposal even without the main one. Any one of those held enough destructive power to obliterate a tank or battleship, not to mention a flesh-and-blood human.

"Are you recalling what we did to the Water Strider?" asked Heivia. "That was planting a bomb on parts to be put in the Object which we subsequently detonated. But we can't do that here. This is software maintenance, so no parts are even being replaced. Not to mention that we can't approach the Deep Optical or even the area filled with the spare parts."

"…Where are the spare parts kept?"

"At almost the exact opposite corner of the base from these barracks. But it's too far away for the diet drink excuse to work. The armbands there are red. Not that it matters since we don't have any color."

For the Deep Optical's maintenance building, they needed blue or green armbands.

For the storage area for the Object's spare parts, they needed red armbands.

There were no exceptions to that. Having the diet drinks would not get them through. In fact, it would seem even more suspicious.

"…What color armbands do we need for the storage area for non-Object supplies?"

"Yellow. And we might be able to sneak into somewhere like that. But what does it matter? We aren't going to find Object parts in a normal storage area. Even if we set a trap, it would never reach the Deep Optical. It's meaningless."

"Not necessarily," said Quenser. "Basically, we just have to make sure the Deep Optical can't fight."

"?"

"But there's a bigger issue. Heivia, I want to compare my information with yours."

"What is it, Quenser?" asked Heivia.

Quenser carefully chose his words as he replied, "Do the people of this maintenance base keep to the standards of the modern clean battlefield?"

Part 16

A Capitalist Corporations commander named Lieutenant Colonel Rockbelt Deansgate clicked his tongue.

When the Shadow Code arrived at the gate, specified soldiers were instructed to inform him. However, it had not been that long since the last Shadow Code delivery. This had made him suspicious and the fact that the items had still not arrived furthered his suspicions. After a quick patrol, he had found the handcart abandoned behind the barracks.

Rockbelt grabbed one of the bottles and brought it close to his face. That was all it took to tell him they were fakes. He did not even need to test the taste or smell. He threw the bottle to the ground and switched on his radio.

The bright lights turned to face inside the maintenance base rather than outside.

As he pressed his back against the storage building's wall, drops of liquid that were clearly not from the squall appeared all over Heivia's body.

"Damn, they've caught on!! The entire area's lit up brighter than midday!!"

"Just as expected. When the diet drinks failed to show up and the soldiers delivering them completely disappeared, anyone would realize something was up. Once they checked the contents of the bottles, they would know for sure."

"Was it really worth heading out to this storage building?" said Heivia as he looked at the building with an expression showing he did not think so. "It's true that almost no one heads out to this end of the base, so we could head straight here without a yellow armband. But as I said before, there's nothing related to the Deep Optical here! No matter what sabotage we carry out, none of it will reach the Object!!"

"We're not targeting the Deep Optical."

"What?"

"We may not be able to directly destroy that Second Generation Object, but we can stop the maintenance."

Some intruders had gotten in.

Rockbelt Deansgate immediately thought of the maintenance building for the Deep Optical…or as they called it, Charbetty. As he ran through the irritating rain, he contacted the soldiers inside the maintenance building over his radio.

"No, everything is normal here! There are no records of any suspicious people entering and Charbetty's readings are completely normal."

(I suppose it would be impossible to get within those thick walls using normal methods…)

However, the same could be said about the maintenance base itself and the intruders had already made it inside the base.

Rockbelt himself was part of the reason for that, but that fact never crossed his mind.

Suddenly…

"Wah!?" said the soldier on the other end of the radio.

"What is it?"

"Charbetty's defragmentation speed suddenly dropped. This is strange. We're using quite a large computer for just this task!!"

"We don't target the Deep Optical itself. Who knows if we could even destroy it with every ounce of explosives we have. To stop the maintenance, we have to target the large computer helping with the defragmentation," said Quenser. "As long as we know how the Deep Optical and the computer are connected, we have various methods we can use. If it's located away from the maintenance building, we just have to dig up the underground cable or jam the wireless signal."

"But they'll make sure there is as little opening for sabotage as possible, right? After surrounding the building with such thick walls, it would be safest to keep everything necessary inside."

"Why has the processing speed dropped!? Is it hardware trouble or could this be a cyber attack!?"

"The hardware used for the defragmentation is not connected to the network! And it has no external media attached!! It is most likely a hardware problem!!"

(This is bad.)

They could not stop the defragmentation of the main cannon's electronic control program. Doing so would require redoing everything from the initial settings which would take days to

complete. If the other world powers caught wind of it, other Objects might very well attack.

"Should we continue the process?"

"Of course."

"The only possibilities I can think of are overheating, external interference from powerful electromagnetic waves, severed wires within the machine, or simply an unexpected breakdown of the machine."

"An electromagnetic attack sounds the most like something intruders would do, but it can't be that. If that was happening, we would hear some kind of horrible static over the radio."

"To prevent damage to the data being defragmented, I can distribute the work over several processing systems. We don't have anything else on the level of the large computer being used now, but I can think of some pieces of hardware we could use."

"Can you do so while continuing the current task without interrupting it?"

"It will take a fair bit of acrobatics, but yes."

"Then…"

Rockbelt almost continued with "do it", but he felt a chill run down his spine.

"…Are the subsystem machines inside the maintenance building?"

"N-no." The soldier sounded less confident now. "These other machines are not currently being used, so they are being stored in one of the storage buildings."

(So that's it!!)

"Listen, second lieutenant. Do not go ahead with your subsystem idea. Continue the defragging with the current system."

"B-but…!?"

"No matter what happens, do not open the door to the maintenance building!! Even if it's me asking you to! That is what the intruders are after. They are causing this problem so that equipment and personnel are brought into the maintenance building!!"

"!?"

"Anyone coming in could be spies carrying bombs and any computer you bring in could have explosives hidden in it!! So do not open that door no matter what!! As long as that door remains closed, the intruders cannot do anything to Charbetty! Do you understand, second lieutenant!?"

"I do, lieutenant colonel!!"

Upon hearing his subordinate's response, Rockbelt laughed quietly in the rain.

He had been planning to head into the maintenance building himself, but remaining outside was safest for the unit as a whole.

The maintenance base zone was large. However, it was still a limited space.

The intruders could not hide forever.

Once the defenses of the maintenance building were fortified, they just had to carry out a thorough search.

Then it would be checkmate.

"But can we really get into the maintenance building so easily?" Heivia was skeptical. "They know that's the most important spot on the base. Once something goes wrong, won't fortifying its entrance be the first thing they do? We won't be able to sneak in during the confusion or send in a bomb-laden piece of equipment."

"True, sending in someone or something would be difficult," said Quenser as he dug through the items in the storage building. "But that just means we have to use something that can pass through the building's thick walls."

"Ahn? You mean we'll use some kind of electromagnetic weapon?"

"No, nothing as over-the-top as that," said Quenser as he left the storage building.

In his hand, he held…

"A gas burner to burn away vegetation?"

"Quick-drying concrete meant to withstand explosions and compressed ceramic cubes will resist heat. …However, the heat will pass straight through the wall if enough is accumulated." Quenser lightly waved around the device that was made up of numerous connected tanks and pipes. "That is why I wanted to know where the computer is. Even if it's in the thick walls of the maintenance building, it will be kept against the wall so it doesn't get in the way of their work, don't you think?"

And their invasion began.

Quenser and Heivia were behind the maintenance building.

Rockbelt and the others fortifying the entrance would not think to look there. Even if an Object cannon could destroy the sturdy walls, they could not be destroyed by the amount of military explosives a combat engineer could carry around. Once you were sure no one could blow a hole in the walls, your focus naturally stayed with the existing entrance.

"How did you figure out where the computer is?"

"From the vapor coming out of that pipe on the wall. That's likely from the cooling system," replied Quenser. "As I said before, heat will pass through the wall. The same goes for cooling. Basically, the coolest spot will be where the equipment they want to keep the coolest is. That means we just have to check the temperature with our hands. Using the burner there will be perfect ."

Bluish-white flames spewed from the pipe-shaped opening of the device Quenser was carrying.

When it first touched the thick concrete wall, the moisture on the surface audibly evaporated. Afterwards, the surface of the concrete turned white…and then to the orange of heated stone.

This was the cause of the fall in the large computer's defrag speed that Rockbelt and the soldier had discussed.

The correct answer was overheating.

Quenser and Heivia had been heating the wall with the burner the entire time.

Quenser and Heivia did not get to see the change firsthand.

The first people to notice were naturally the maintenance soldiers working on the Deep Optical on the other side of the wall.

"What? Why is there black smoke over there…?"

"Shit! The computer's outer casing is melting!!"

"Stop, don't get near it! Wah!?"

A maintenance soldier who frantically attempted to approach the large computer convulsed as if he had been struck by lightning and then a roar as if the air were being split reverberated throughout the maintenance building.

There was an electric leak.

As soon as the maintenance soldiers realized that, the monitors they were focused on became wrapped in darkness.

Yes.

The monitors displaying the progress of their Object's defragmentation.

And naturally, determining the cause was not difficult once that result was seen.

Lieutenant Colonel Rockbelt Deansgate hurried to the back of the maintenance building accompanied by several soldiers.

"Freeze!!"

The intruders continued to fire the flames of the burner into the concrete wall up to the instant he let out that shout.

The one intruder finally switched off the burner and casually tossed it aside.

He then said, “If you’re in that much of a hurry, I assume we managed to stop the defrag. You must be pretty worried about how much the cluster damage spread to the Object.”

“Do you understand your situation here?”

“Do you?” asked the other intruder. “If this is a true clean and safe battlefield, you are the ones in trouble.”

“This is the age of Objects. Victory is decided by the Objects, so soldiers do not die needlessly,” said the first intruder, sounding as if he was enjoying himself. “But when those rules are broken, it all breaks down into total war. That means we throw every military force we have at each other. And which side is in trouble if that happens? Your precious Deep Optical can likely destroy most weapons without using its main cannon…but that does not include other Objects. Not even a nuke can destroy an Object’s armor. The firepower of another Object’s main cannon is needed.”

“…”

Rockbelt understood what the intruders were trying to say.

They seemed to belong to a unit of one of the other world powers.

(From recent developments, my guess would be the Legitimacy Kingdom unit that crushed Hyena.)

"Are you telling me to let you go?"

"If you're fine with a deadly battle breaking out, you don't have to, but keep in mind that we have the upper hand. After all, we have a usable Object and you do not. Surely you can see that your entire base will be slaughtered if you don't go along with our demands no matter how unreasonable they may be."

"If you like, we can call in our cute princess. Oh, and if you kill us here, the footage will reach the Object. Are you willing to fight a pissed-off monstrous weapon?"

"It would only take one shot." The first intruder made a gun sign with his hand and held the index finger up to his temple. " The decision is yours. Take the shot if you like. But if all-out war begins, you won't be able to use the white flag."

If both of their Objects had been in working order, Rockbelt could have ignored everything the intruders had to say.

But that was not the case.

It had been clear from the moment he had shouted "freeze".

Once their Object had been rendered unusable, the battle was over.

He could hardly admit it, but he had been looking for a point of compromise.

(Fortunately, Charbetty was not completely taken out. If we redo the main cannon's defragmentation, she can head back to the battlefield. It is crucial that I keep the damages here to a minimum.)

Rockbelt forcibly clenched his back teeth as he forced down his anger as he said, "Fine then. We will go along with your proposal. "

"But!!" shouted the second lieutenant who worked as Rockbelt' s aide.

When the Charbetty's defragmentation had been forcibly stopped, the second lieutenant had opened the door to the maintenance building and joined Rockbelt.

"They say this is a safe and clean battlefield, but they are the ones that broke the rules first! They have no right to force their demands on us!!"

"Second lieutenant."

"Just do it! No, I will do it!! If our information is accurate, our enemy will likely be the Legitimacy Kingdom's First Generation Object. Even when not at full capacity, Charbetty's odds of

winning are greater than 0%!! We need to remain resolute and-…!!"

Rockbelt clicked his tongue.

He pulled a handgun from the holster at his waist and unhesitatingly fired a bullet between the second lieutenant's eyes.

Rockbelt did not even hear a scream.

The man was dead before the gunshot had faded. Afterwards, a silence that made one forget about the squall filled the area.

"You do not stand up to them because the odds are not 0%, second lieutenant. You quickly fall back because the odds are not 100%."

Rockbelt sounded like he was spitting out the words because the second lieutenant's actions could easily have put the lives of the entire unit at risk.

Rockbelt had quickly dealt with the threat, but that had not quelled his personal feelings.

It was the intruders who had created the situation in which he had to do so.

"I will give in this time," said Rockbelt in a frighteningly chilly voice. "But just this once. This alone has created enough of a reason for our unit and the Second Generation Charbetty to attack

you. Once you leave here and find some safe place, you can curl up in the corner and think about what that means. But it would be best to assume there is nowhere safe."

Part 17

And thus Quenser and Heivia succeeded in applying a certain level of damage to the Deep Optical.

The Capitalist Corporations was desperately attempting to hide the fact that the Deep Optical could not use its main cannon, but the armed group intercepted radio transmissions saying it was headed for the Capitalist Corporations block of the coalition troops in the Oceania district for official repairs.

In other words, it had been successfully driven out of the Loyauté district.

"Wonderful!! We had heard the rumors, but we never really thought you would drive away that Object!!" said the leader of the armed group as he proudly welcomed Quenser and Heivia back. " Now the Deep Optical will no longer wreak havoc on the Loyauté district! The tragedy you saw and the tragedies you could not see will no longer occur!!"

His words were completely truthful, but there was one thing he failed to mention.

He had a hand behind his back in which he held a large handgun.

Once their role was complete, he had no more use for heroes.

He could not have the two boys asking for any kind of a reward and they had seen too much of what the armed group had done.

"Today is a day for drinking!! With the Deep Optical gone, the foundation of our income should return! This is a celebration of your success and the better times on the horizon, so do not hold back!!"

"There is one other thing we must tell you first," said Quenser quietly.

The change in tone made the leader tense up. He clenched the handgun behind his back unnecessarily tight.

But that indescribable feeling was fleeting.

Before he could figure out what it was, a much greater feeling drove it away.

He felt multiple gazes on him from the trees all around him.

The leader frantically looked over at the watchtower, but he could only see the guard's upper body hanging over the railing with a gunshot to the head.

In the next instant, explosions occurred at various points along the barbed wire surrounding the base and soldiers charged in.

They were Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.

"I told you not to think this would have a happy ending."

The soldiers moved quickly through the small base and either shot the members of the armed group or had them surrender. A few tried to take up defensive positions and fire at the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers from blind spots, but each one was eliminated by either a sniper's bullet or a distant mortar.

Despite all this, the leader attempted to fight back.

However, he stopped moving shortly thereafter.

The reason for this was simple.

One of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldier's assault rifles had a sensor attached to the end that was oddly large for some kind of targeting assistance.

It was a Cursor that was linked with the Object so the area the rifle aimed at would be accurately bombarded by the Object.

The leader of the armed group had no way of knowing this, but Quenser had asked one other thing of the Valkyrie woman in addition to acquiring the diet drink bottles.

If you have a long-range radio, give my ID number to the Legitimacy Kingdom maintenance base zone and tell them the following: We will be finished soon, so come to get us at Point RN in 10 hours' time.

And they had done so.

They had come to rescue Quenser and Heivia from their kidnappers.

And to make the leader of the armed group pay for his crimes.

It had been entirely possible Froleytia could have followed military regulations and left Quenser and Heivia for dead, but their risk was nothing compared to that of the armed group and its leader.

The Elite princess that piloted the Baby Magnum and Froleytia who gave the princess her orders both had no reason to show any mercy to or hold back against the armed group.

It was not an issue of Quenser and Heivia. The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion had already shown they would not allow such armed groups to exist with their overwhelming suppression of Hyena.

"Whatever your reasons may have been and regardless of whether they volunteered or not, you still cut off those children's limbs to further your goal."

The Object that was providing indirect firepower finally became evident on the battlefield.

Specifically, its static electricity propulsion device could be heard. How did that low rumbling as if from distant thunder sound to the armed group and its leader?

The large handgun dropped to the muddy ground while his hand was still hidden behind his back.

He could have shot Quenser and Heivia in desperation, but he dropped the gun instead.

That was how much awe-inspiring fear he felt.

That firepower could grab at the human soul in a fundamental way as if the monstrous weapon stood at a higher point on the food chain.

As he had faced Objects several times before, Quenser knew exactly what kind of pressure was squeezing at the leader's chest.

"And I also told you not to forget that the day would come when you had to pay for this, remember?"

Part 18

It all came to an end in no time at all.

The wooden building Quenser and Heivia informed the princess of over the radio was the only one left completely unscathed by the Baby Magnum. That was where the children were kept. Everything else was blown to pieces.

The Baby Magnum did not even need to appear directly on the battlefield.

The princess merely aimed her laser beams at the points provided by the foot soldiers' targeting information.

She targeted people, equipment, and buildings.

As he watched things turn to black ash and be torn apart and turn to red flames and disappear, Quenser felt the power human beings used to support each other fading away.

Most likely, what Quenser and Heivia had been doing was nothing more than a game of cat and mouse to the Baby Magnum.

With the power of those monstrous weapons that could carry an entire war and influence the course of history, that armed group would not have had to rely on Quenser and Heivia or turn blades on their own children.

Those weapons moved history.

They changed the flow of history.

There was a great difference between those that had them and those that did not.

"He said those children volunteered," muttered Quenser quietly. "Will those children hate us for destroying the world they believed in that much?"

"How should I know? That isn't for us to decide. Only those children can do that," said Heivia, but his words were not very clearly spoken. He took a deep breath before speaking again. "Hey , Quenser."

"What?"

"If I…If I really do gain control of the Winchell family one day, I could use some extra money to…"

"And if I become an Object designer…No…that isn't the way to do this."

"?"

"…We can start now. Even if it isn't much."

The squall of pouring rain came to an end.

One of the children shivering in the wooden building walked out using a cane. He spotted two shining objects.

They were sparkling in the warmth of the sun.

Would he ever realize what feelings were held within those two coins?

Chapter 2: Christmas on a White Sand Beach >> Furlough Garrison Battle (?) in Oceania

Part 1

The Oceania district.

With the dictatorship that had held a tyrannical rule over that land destroyed, the coalition-led restoration had accelerated.

The Legitimacy Kingdom's 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's convoy made up of over 100 large vehicles was stationed there and a "cityscape" had cropped up around it.

"We can't have everything spreading out like this," said Froleytia Capistrano as sweet-smelling smoke drifted up from her narrow kiseru.

She was speaking with the old lady who led maintenance on the Baby Magnum.

"Yes, but it is only natural for shops to set up in areas where money is likely to change hands."

"We purposefully distanced ourselves from the urban areas to keep the civilians out of any unforeseen dangers, but we can't stop them from setting up a market made up of tents and RVs. Someone could easily use this to sneak in close and fire a shell at the base."

"Even if we move the convoy away, they will simply follow us. That is probably why they are using shops that are so easy to set up and take apart. If they make money, they will be happy. And this will prevent the conspiracy theories surrounding the secrecy over Object technology. Just think of this as an advertisement in that fashion."

Froleytia and the old lady were sitting on a sheet spread across the sandy ground within the maintenance base with a parasol stuck into the ground next to them.

However, a hellish scene of sweat and tears existed just 3 meters away from their vacation mood.

"Quenser, the water filtration devices come in sets of 15 boxes. Once you have confirmed their arrival, make an entry in the database and carry them all to storage."

"...O...kay..."

"Quenser, that box is full of champagne bottles. You can use the dolly if you like, but I will kill you if they get shaken up. Also, make sure you do not leave the cold room's door open."

"...Pant...pant..."

"Queeeeennnnssssseeerrrr, that one is my Japanese sword and that one is my Japanese armor and helmet. That one is my set of

Japanese dolls and that is my Japanese furisode. Be careful as you carry them. We aren't often part of a coalition force. I need to find all the best deals while the market is in chaos."

Quenser Barbotage collapsed in the middle of the sandy ground .

"...I-I can't. I can't go on. I've been doing nothing but physical labor for three days now... I thought this was supposed to be paid leave. We finally managed to get back, so what happened to the swimsuits?"

"What? Was Quenser, the boy who ignored several war treaties to go off to fight the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Object, just saying something to me, the one who had to write report after report frantically emphasizing the damage to the Deep Optical and forcing a smile as I put up with the jokes of those old men higher up the ranks that are at least borderline sexual harassment to somehow avoid having you court martialed?"

"Gyahhh!! I'll do anything! I'll go along with whatever you say for the rest of my life, commander!!"

Quenser raised his sand-covered face and screamed.

"...It almost looks like he's enjoying this," muttered the old lady, but it seemed no one heard her.

As Quenser wiped the sand from his body, he asked, "B-By the way, where is Heivia?"

"Cleaning the bathrooms, cleaning the bath pipes, cleaning the washing machine drums, and cleaning the convoy's engine rooms. And that's for every single one of the base's over 100 vehicles."

"Y-You're kidding! Nothing but cleaning!?"

Quenser could only raise a prayer for the different sort of hell Heivia had been sent to as he still had to deal with his own hell.

Froleytia paid him no heed and said, "Once you finish that...Oh, I know. The Japanese paulownia wood chest I bought yesterday should be delivered to the base soon. The civilian deliveryman won't be able to get inside the base, so bring it to my room after its security check at the gate."

"I want a powered suit for this!!"

"After that...Oh, right. There is that other important matter."

"I'll die. I'm really going to die!! Wait, I get it. The final boss this time is my huge-breasted commander!!""

"What, is it really that bad?" Froleytia calmly breathed out some smoke. "The princess wants to go swimming at the Great Barrier Reef, so she needs some bodyguards. But if you would really prefer to stick around the convoy and its stench of oil and exhaust, suit yourself."

"Please let me go!!"

Part 2

Meanwhile, Heivia was also finally released from his hell. He was currently relaxing outside the maintenance base zone.

"God dammit. Everyone knew I was being used as that huge-breasted commander's toy, so they all forced their ridiculous demands on me too."

At a coffee shop made out of an RV, Heivia sipped at an iced coffee that did not seem the type of thing a noble would drink. With the double punch of heat caused by the roasting sun above and the reflected sunlight coming from the sand below, he could hardly order a hot drink.

The "cityscapes" that developed around a maintenance base zone during times like that were quite a different thing from a standard safe country city or an Oceanian city.

Not a single concrete building could be seen.

Everything was made to be set up or broken down within half an hour. The Object and its maintenance base zone could set up or move out immediately to match the military situation, and those making up the "cityscape" were hardly going to let any chance to make money slip by.

As Heivia sipped at the iced coffee that no longer had any ice in it, he heard a high-pitched girl's voice.

"Welcome, internet viewers!! Welcome to the Oceanian Live – Class A!! Oh ho ho ho ho!!"

He looked over and saw a 3D projector set up in the store displaying an Information Alliance idol concert that had been held a few days prior. It was free to watch for a week after the event, but would it really draw in any customers?

(Well, it looks more like the guy running the store is the only one watching.)

The 3D image was not displayed on a screen. Instead, the it appeared directly in empty space. Quenser likely could have excitedly explained exactly how it worked, but Heivia did not know. He had a feeling it was something along the lines of sending out light waves from multiple directions to display the image with the increase and decrease of the light waves' amplitudes.

The image only appeared 3D from head on. When viewed from the side, the images for the right eye and left eye were out of sync which made for a dizzying sight.

"Diffracted waves are used to create the separate images. This is the latest model," explained the shop owner who must have been bored.

He seemed more proud of the projector than the idol who was passionately singing a popular song.

(Why can't it just be the students who are proud of their machines?)

With that thought, Heivia changed the subject.

"Do you like idols?"

"Better than other Elites at least. The Information Alliance's idols seem friendlier than the patriotic heroes and the million dollar players."

The idol dancing in the 3D image was tall, had ringlet curls, and had G-cup breasts. As Heivia watched, he decided the dance moves were definitely designed to make her breasts jiggle.

Meanwhile, the shop owner stealthily added one last thing to his comment.

"...And this one has big breasts."

"So that really is your reason!! Well, I can't deny that I wish our princess would do this kind of thing."

As Heivia spoke, the writing and patterns on the dancing G-cup idol's special suit changed in real time.

No normal material could do that.

A musical score made of ribbons appeared in midair and wrapped around the G-cup idol's bewitching body in sync to her singing.

"Class A sure is showy," said the shop owner. "The A stands for 'augmented reality'. Most likely, the actual idol is dancing in all blue or all green tights, but it sure does look nice like this. Then again, the completely fictitious Class V takes it a step further."

"I prefer R for reality. All of Class A's panty shots are prearranged, right?"

"You say that, but you can't seem to take your eyes off her thighs."

"Sorry, but I prefer tits," said Heivia with a perfectly serious expression.

The fact that the writing and patterns of the idol's outfit could be freely altered also meant the figure of the idol could be directly altered in the footage, but Heivia's imagination did not seem to reach that far.

Heivia brought the cheap iced coffee back to his lips as his gaze was drawn to the chest of the 3D image, but then...

"Oh, it's Heivia. If it isn't Heivia."

"Bff!?"

Heivia very nearly spat out the iced coffee because he recognized the girl who had called out to him. She was the daughter of the Vanderbilt family as well as Heivia's fiancée. However, she was only unofficially his fiancée for the moment due to various circumstances. Normally, she would never be seen outside of an inner room of a mansion within the Legitimacy Kingdom's home country.

Heivia began to tremble when he saw that girl wearing a dress covered in jewels that did not suit that market that had a mixed and gray atmosphere.

"Y-You...? Why are you here...?"

"Why do you find it so odd? Oceania's military regime was destroyed and the coalition invasion has come to an end. This is a safe country now. There is no problem with civilians coming here."

"(The resolution of the issue with the military nation is now leading to skirmishes between the members of the coalition to see who gains the most power here, so things are actually more strained here than ever.)"

"Did you say something?"

Heivia shook his head.

"Wait, where are your bodyguards? Don't tell me you came here on your own."

"My family would not stop complaining about how I was acting , so I gave them the slip."

"That just makes this worse!! Now I can't just get back to my military work after chatting with you!!"

"Oh, but isn't it only because I slipped away from them that we can have such an elegant chat? Right, Heivia...or should I say Romeo?"

"Well, 'Juliet', I get the feeling your guards are going to track you down and then shoot me when they find me with you."

"Oh, dear. You do not seem very moved over a chance meeting with your fiancée." The girl frowned slightly. "I sincerely hope

some horrible woman has not gotten to you while I have been away."

"Absolutely not!! In fact, every time a good opportunity comes up the useless guy who is always with me gets it!!"

"So you admit that some 'good opportunities' have occurred."

"..."

Heivia's eyes swam to the side like two synchronized swimmers .

The daughter of the Vanderbilt family gave a gentle smile.

"Heivia, I am not an intolerant woman. You are a noble man. You are free to have mistresses. That is merely a type of status symbol." After a short pause, the girl's voice grew cold. "However, if you put anyone above me even for an instant...you know what will happen, don't you?"

"Y-Y-Yes, I know very well. You don't have to specify. Really, you don't."

"I will have to use the tower collection"

"But that's nothing but the whips, wooden horses, and the like that tyrannical relative of yours used!! Your family claims to only keep them around to make sure you never forget the past that destroyed your family!!"

A sense of intimidation of a different sort than that given off by his large-breasted commander caused a chill to run down Heivia's back.

His fiancée was a cute girl, but she unfortunately seemed to have some "tsun"[1] and "yan"[2] to her.

Part 3

The princess swimming in the ocean.

The princess in a plain but lovely swimsuit.

From the moment Froleytia ordered him to join the pilot Elite's bodyguard unit, the driving force running Quenser had entered an odd mode. It was similar to running a gasoline engine on rocket fuel. He had not slept for three days, but his sleepiness gauge had circled all the way around and he no longer felt like sleeping at all and felt a bit uneasy. With his good fortune having finally reached its peak, he may have subconsciously wanted to burn every last instant of it into his mind.

"...Quenser, you are joining my bodyguards?" asked the princess.

"Seems that way, miss swimsuit!!"

"?"

"Let's go let's go let's go! The beach the beach the beach! You know what is expected of you, right, miss swimsuit!?"

Quenser eagerly pushed at the princess from behind to get her into the backseat of the military 4WD vehicle.

While the beach was close to the base, it was still outside of its defensive range. Their 4WD vehicle was at the center and two more were placed to the front and to the back. Also, an armored vehicle protected them on either side. This was commonly known as a sabre formation.

The formation could only be used in the desert where, unlike an urban area, the width of the road could be ignored. While it would stand up to a sudden attack from an anti-tank missile, it would be of no use against an Object.

"So you wanted to go to the Great Barrier Reef? That's the world's largest coral reef, right?"

"I do not care where. I just want to swim in something other than a bathtub."

The princess pinched at the special suit clinging to her body and tugged as she spoke. The suit was supposed to be perfectly air conditioned, but it seemed she still found it somewhat uncomfortable.

The small convoy reached the beach without coming under attack.

The beach was covered in smooth, white sand that was clearly different from earthen color of the desert. Just looking out at the sea that looked like blue and green dissolved together was a wonderful sight and the richly-colored tropical fish below the surface would be yet another type of heaven.

However, Quenser ignored it all.

"Okay, miss swimsuit!! The time has come for you to show us your majestic form!! If you're going with the standard, it will be a plain but lovely one piece swimsuit. But if you want to push the unexpected angle, it could be a revealing bikini! Or even a custom-made one-of-a-kind sexy swimsuit!! So what is your answer, princess!? Give me your answer!!"

He may have been there in the name of protecting the princess, but Quenser's muscle tone and level of equipment was clearly lacking compared to the other bodyguards. Heaven had answered his prayers and he had been rewarded with the duty of looking at a slender girl in a swimsuit, so he had no intention of focusing on anything else. If an Object attacked right that instant, he would likely have completely ignored it.

Meanwhile, the princess was completely oblivious to his expectations.

"?"

"Oh!! But this isn't a properly maintained beach! There are no motels around here, so there is no safe place to change! I guess you'll have to hide behind the 4WD vehicle and blush with

embarrassment as you use it as a changing area! What is this? Just the swimsuit would have been more than enough of a reward, but it seems the feast begins even before that!!"

Quenser's seemingly endless excitement was partially fueled by the princess's normal outfit.

The special suit was completely skintight, so it was not all that bad. However, its defenses were too tight and he never had a chance to see her soft skin. And it was her uniform, so she wore it year round. That ultra-perfect wholesome defense ensured that Quenser never saw anything even remotely approaching a glimpse of her panties. With the thought "Isn't it about time you moved on to the next step, boy?" in his mind, Quenser's brain had gone a bit crazy at the chance to see her in a swimsuit where various odds were greatly changed. However, the way he was acting could all be filed under the category of "it can't be helped".

"Okay, miss swimsuit!! Your answer! It's time for your answer!! I'm ready. Right now, I'm willing to accept pretty much anything. Nothing but large bandages would be fine. So what is your answer , miss swimsuit!? Please give me your answer!!"

"What is a swimsuit?"

.....
.....

In that instant, it was not just Quenser who froze in place. The bodyguards who were spread around the area seriously carrying out their duties secretly did as well.

That was a bad start.

With that thought, Quenser frantically tried to keep the situation from switching over to a different set of rails.

"P-Princess...? You shouldn't answer a question with a question. "

"I did not bring whatever a swimsuit is with me."

Hearing that response, Quenser's eyes opened up wide.

He was intent on keeping things pointed in the direction of bare skin even if he had to force it.

"So you're going nude!? I see, I see. I certainly did not expect your answer to go that far!!"

"I am going to swim like this. An Elite's special suit is made to withstand any environment, so there is no problem with swimming in it."

"No!!!!!" Due to the Japanese comedy routines he had seen in Froleytia's officer room, Quenser's shout had an odd intonation to it. "You, um...can't do that!! That special suit is wonderful. I can't deny that! But wonderful though it is...this isn't the place for it!! This is a scene for something out of the ordinary!! Just as we would be really pissed if an Object showed up now, you simply can't choose the special suit here!!"

"?"

"No, don't tilt your cute little head to the side like that!! Wait, it's not too late! If we head back to the market around the base, we can find all sorts of cute swimsuits, sexy swimsuits, and even sexier swimsuits!! Let's go, princess. I am perfectly fine with having to start from the stage of you blushing in embarrassment as you choose a swimsuit!!"

But as soon as Quenser grabbed the princess's hand and tried to run off, the entire bodyguard unit aimed their guns at him.

They seemed intent on preserving the initial time schedule.

"...I really don't think there's anything wrong with wanting to at least get a school swimsuit here."

The bodyguards agreed with him there.

Part 4

"Oh, ladies, are you from the Faith Organization? If you have any dietary restrictions, tell me now," said the owner of a restaurant of the type that could be found anywhere in Oceania those days.

A tent made of waterproof cloth created a simple roof under which a large metal plate, a few chairs, and a cooler full of seafood were set up.

One of the customers showed a thin smile that completely failed as a polite smile.

She was Sarasa Gleamshifter of Valkyrie.

"No, our doctrines require no such restrictions."

"We can chow down on octopus and squid."

"We're more used to wild boar, though."

Her subordinates, Rachel and Maria gave their own opinions. Maria's response was more halfhearted as she was watching a 3D image of an Information Alliance idol Elite.

The restaurant owner smiled and said, "Then I don't have to hold back. Since you've come down to the southern hemisphere, you might as well make some memories by choosing something more unusual."

"We will be paying in the Faith Organization method. Is that okay?"

"Let's see, the Faith Organization puts more focus on precious metals than paper money, correct? The exchange rate with foreign currencies is set using platinum and diamonds as their value is more fixed, I believe. I'll have to call in an appraiser which will make this take longer, but I can manage."

"No, we will be using Faith Organization paper money," replied Sarasa. "Unfortunately, we cannot rely on platinum at the moment. "

Sarasa paused briefly before that last comment, but the restaurant owner did not seem to notice.

"Well, the conclusions of an appraiser can easily be argued with. Real money that is accepted around the world is best."

The man prepared some small fish of a coloration Sarasa had never before seen and then placed them atop the heated metal plate. She had no idea what he intended to do with them, but he did not gut them. He placed them in a small bowl with some strong seasonings and mixed it all together.

Cooking on a metal plate like that was a type of show.

As the restaurant owner cooked the tropical fish in a skillful manner that functioned as a form of entertainment, he gave a bitter smile and said, "I would have a wider variation of dishes if I had beef, but it's just too expensive."

"Come to think of it, the natural balance in Oceania has yet to be restored," commented Rachel as she was caught up in watching the food dance across the metal plate. "The dictatorship was pushing the extreme forestation while the local tribes resisted it in favor of the original desert. Because the environment was so radically changed again and again in some areas, the coalition has to carefully regulate the quality of the soil. There are a lot of restrictions on grazing land to prevent the balance between vegetation and desert from collapsing."

"Yes. Thanks to that we have to rely on importation despite how large the country is. But lately platinum mining has really grown. Rumor has it the Information Alliance is bringing in tons of domed livestock facilities and container-shaped animal feed factories. If

they can do that, it doesn't matter if the entire area's a desert. The local tribes won't like the imported feed, but it shouldn't be too much of an issue as long as it all stays isolated within the containers. If it all works out, solar power generation can be used to create a huge sterilized farm in the middle of the desert. The food shortage will be resolved in no time at all." After delightedly explaining all that, the restaurant owner suddenly realized something and added an additional comment. "Oh, do people from the Faith Organization oppose that kind of technology that creates manmade food sources? Y'know, genetically altered crops and the like."

After all, the Faith Organization was well known for accepting the theories of evolution and the big bang yet insisting that a nonhuman supernatural trigger had to have caused those scientific coincidences.

It was true that they were not fond of manmade recreations of natural works.

But Sarasa readily shook her head.

"The Central Religious Assembly's conclusion on the 89th issue regarding food sources resolved any such issues. Also, the Faith Organization is not as unyielding as others seem to think."

"Is that so?" muttered the man vaguely as he continued to move his hands over the metal plate.

Sarasa went on to say, "For example, let us say man has created a material that does not exist at all in the natural world. Do you think the Faith Organization would find fault in this?"

"...Well, yeah. Don't you say that denies god's providence, or brings an impurity into the world god created, or something like that?"

"We are not so sensitive as to take up arms over the creation of plastic." Sarasa smiled lightly. "We compromise. If you use oxygen and hydrogen to create water, the materials you have used were taken from the world that god originally created. For that reason, the water you have created is nothing more than a derivation of what god has created. You have not brought an impurity into the world god created. The same reasoning can be used to permit plastics and carbon nanotubes."

"I see."

"We do not start conflicts because we wish to. If we are able to compromise, we will do so to avoid needless conflict."

At that point, all expression suddenly disappeared from Sarasa's face and she muttered something under her breath.

"(But when people set foot into a territory that allows for no compromise like that old man, we will assassinate them no matter what.)"

"?"

The restaurant owner did not seem able to hear what she had said.

With the conversation ended but the man's focus still on them, Sarasa changed the subject and asked a question.

"How about by boat?"

With that alone, it was hard to tell what she meant.

However, the man immediately replied.

"I wouldn't count on it. Recently, you probably could have gotten away with poaching fish, but there aren't many boats now. Of course, that means I have plenty of customers from those large groups, so I'm not complaining."

"...How about by air?"

"Are you trying to transport people or goods rather than fish? That could be tough. This is Oceania. Multiple world powers have Objects here. If you send out a helicopter of unknown affiliation, it will be shot down by anti-air laser. And if you get one world power to allow you through, a different one might not allow you through."

After thinly slicing the cooked fish, the man added a sauce that smelled strongly of blood. Sarasa stabbed her fork into the slices and asked a question.

"You said a boat would have worked recently. What changed?"

"The Legitimacy Kingdom," replied the restaurant owner as he pulled a sea cucumber out of the cooler and sliced it up with his knife. "An Object of theirs...the Baby Magnum I think it's called...is on leave near the beach, so the layout of their surveillance network has changed a lot. From what I hear, the routes connecting Oceania with nearby islands are cut off. But as I said, the military brings in a large group of customers, so I'm welcoming them with open arms."

"So cargo from the Loyauté district cannot get here?"

"Exactly. Honestly, it's scary how quickly Objects can be deployed. An area that was completely safe yesterday can be the front lines today."

"..."

Sarasa narrowed her eyes slightly as she watched the metal spatula dance in front of her.

They had failed on that island.

That meant her target was now...

Part 5

It had been one hell of a day.

By the time Quenser and Heivia met up near the maintenance base zone, it was nearing evening.

"...How'd things go for you?"

"...How about for you?"

From that exchange, it was clear they had both had a large catch get away from them.

Quenser sighed and said, "Where did I go wrong? The setting should have been perfect. So what was it...? What went wrong...?"

"After returning a rich girl ignorant of how the world works back to her guards, I had those same guards chase me around with handguns for 3 hours..."

Those two weary souls suddenly felt their handheld devices vibrate as they received an email.

"I don't want to read it!! That has got to be the sign that Froleytia's ridiculous demands have begun anew!!"

"Quenser, I'll lend you my handgun, so will you please shoot me in the leg?"

That was how far they were ready to go in order to get out of more work, but they found something else entirely when they actually read the email.

> I want to have a Christmas party to give us all a break, but I can't let a civilian bartender into the maintenance base.
> For that reason, all but the bare minimum required

for the current shift are to meet up at point YI.
Let's go nuts drinking tonight.

"..."

"..."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a wordless glance.

They then silently but strongly clenched their fists.

"We still have a chance!!"

"Wait, wait, wait!! This is a Christmas party with the princess and our huge-breasted commander. And December is summertime in Australia!! We'll never see a normal Santa Claus here!! This'll have bare skin, miniskirts, bare thighs, and bouncing breasts!!"

Point YI was not far away.

There was no way congested traffic would make them miss it.

They may have missed out on any swimsuits, but the chance still remained for a sexy Santa.

The two idiots named Quenser and Heivia immediately took action to get to that heaven of changed odds.

A bright red bus and a blue taxi stood before them.

"I'll take the red bus!!" said Quenser.

"Then just for fun, I'll take the blue taxi!!"

And thus their fates were divided...

Part 6

When Quenser arrived at point YI where the party was located, he glanced around.

He was not inside some shop.

Due to the "cityscape" being made up of mostly tents and RVs, there were no shops in which one could leisurely sit around.

A portion of the market was opened up into a plaza and a large number of tables covered in food had been carried in. The free mobility of the shops making up the "cityscape" was a major advantage. They had likely opened up the space to accommodate such important customers.

(Looks like Heivia hasn't arrived yet.)

Soldiers wearing the same uniform as Quenser had already begun to partake in the food and alcohol, but Heivia was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, there's the old lady."

"What? Shouldn't you be speaking with someone younger at a party like this?"

"I thought you would be on standby in the maintenance area in case the Object had to be scrambled."

"The princess is off duty, so there wouldn't be much point. This is a coalition force, so other Objects are taking care of defense. ... But wouldn't this be a perfect opportunity for you to observe the Object?"

"There isn't much to learn when no one is working on it. I need to see it when it's actually fighting. If I'm just going to stare at its surface, I might as well just go to a military magazine site."

"What a boring person. Your ideas lack style. You're the type of person that wouldn't ask for a souvenir from someone heading overseas."

"I'd take some platinum as a souvenir of Oceania. I hear they've been mining a bunch of it lately."

"I see you're pretending to be some wealthy merchant again. And platinum is old news. The days of it having a stable value are over. Research is progressing in ways to mass produce industrial platinum."

"Eh? They're using the platinum for industrial uses?"

"It's used in Objects, too. You need to study some more, student."

As the two spoke, Froleytia approached them from behind with a cocktail glass in hand.

"Oh, you two haven't started eating yet? Who knows when we'll have another chance to eat anything but those flavorless rations. You should eat some while you can."

"Then can't you do something about those ratio—...bfh!?"

Quenser had a good reason for freezing in place the instant he turned around.

Major Froleytia Capistrano had become a miniskirt Santa. Also, her upper body was covered in nothing but a bikini-style piece of clothing that had very little surface area. Her cleavage and midriff were on full display.

After facing postponement after postponement with the princess's swimsuit feint, Quenser very nearly lost control of his emotions at all that bare skin.

"A surprise projectile attack!?"

"I have no idea what you mean, but those military uniforms are hardly suited for the desert."

"Honestly, it's going to get cold once the sun sets. You have no one to blame but yourself when you catch a cold after dressing like that," said the old lady in exasperation, but there was a hint of amusement on her face.

With a confused look, Froleytia asked, "Wait, where is Heivia? Is he not here yet?"

"That's the thing..."

Just as Quenser started to respond, a small electronic tone came from his radio.

(Who could that be? Someone from the maintenance base?)

Quenser moved away from his commander and hit the switch on the radio.

"It's me!! It's me!! It's Heivia!!"

"Where did you get off to? I'm already at the party. You should have chosen the red bus..."

"I've gotten caught up in some kind of incident!! Tonight, I'm gonna be the hero!! But I have one request for you!"

"If you want help, you can forget it!! I'm not taking a step away from this party!! And if you want to know why, it's because there's a well-endowed Santa right in front of me!!"

"That's fine, that's fine!!"

"?"

"I don't see how I can avoid a firefight in the middle of the city. But we aren't in a battle right now, so this is technically a job for the police. ...To be blunt, we could be in trouble if that huge-breasted commander catches wind of this!!"

"No, not 'we'. I'm not part of it this time!!"

"After what happened in the Loyauté district, this would be a third yellow card!!"

"Have we really gotten that many yellow cards?"

"At any rate, we'll be in real trouble if we get any more!! I'll take care of this issue on my own, but you need to buy me some time!!"

"...Hm? It's rare for you to be so motivated. The problem is that your motivation isn't always a good thing."

Quenser's long radio conversation must have seemed suspicious because the Santa that was likely going to give him some wet dreams frowned and asked, "Quenser, who are you speaking with? Almost everyone is here."

"Eh? O-Oh, um..."

"Just distract that huge-breasted commander!! Don't let her realize I'm not there!! We're in real trouble otherwise. If I don't deal with this, the Oceanian civilians will be the ones in danger!!"

(Wait. If Heivia is enthusiastically working at something rather than coming to the party, this must be a major issue on an unprecedented level. If an Object shows up, I really am just going to ignore it.)

At any rate, the situation had gotten troublesome.

For one thing, Quenser did not see how he could defeat Froleytia Capistrano via any ordinary means.

"Quenser, answer my question. Who have you been speaking wi—...cough."

Some sand must have been blown in by the wind because Froleytia held her throat.

(This is my chance!!)

Quenser grabbed a glass filled with a clear liquid from a tray held by a civilian waiter passing by.

"Are you okay, Froleytia? Here, have some water."

"Oh. Thanks, Quen—...bbhhh!!!???"

When the miniskirt bikini Santa gulped down the contents of the glass all at once, she let out a noise that Quenser had never thought he would hear from her.

The reason was simple.

"Que—... You!! This is vodka! And straight vodka at that!!"

"I'm sorry, Froleytia!! I must have grabbed the wrong glass! Here, this one is oolong tea!!"

"Honestly I can't believe you—...ugbh!? Th-That was malt whisky!!"

"Oh, no!! Froleytia, I won't get it wrong again! This time, it's mineral water!!" said Quenser as he handed her a cup filled to the brim with tequila.

(C'mon, get drunk!! Get dead drunk!! If she keeps drinking these drinks with such high alcoholic content at such a high rate, even a heavy drinker like her has to get drunk!!)

"...Hic."

After a few more cups, Froleytia was silently hanging her head. Beads of sweat were trailing down her bikinied chest and her skin had grown rather red. The core of her body had grown limp and she was swaying back and forth even while standing still.

(Was the plan a success!?)

Quenser was celebratory at first, but another thought then entered his mind.

(Wait, what happens once she's drunk?)

That question then started eating into the boy's mind.

(This is bad. This might be really, really bad! Froleytia is a complete tyrant when sober, so what's going to happen now that all her limiters have been removed by alcohol!?)

"...Qwensher..."

The low tone and drawn out way that she called his name frightened him.

As an unpleasant sweat began flowing down Quenser's entire body, he could do nothing but stand at attention.

"Y-Yes!? What is it, commander!?"

For a while, Froleytia said nothing.

She was already quite close to Quenser, but she silently yet unsteadily drew even closer to him.

He seriously thought she was going to grab his collar.

And then...

Right in front of him...

Froleytia Capistrano opened her mouth to speak.

"Sob. Why are you always so mean to me, Quenser?"

"?????"

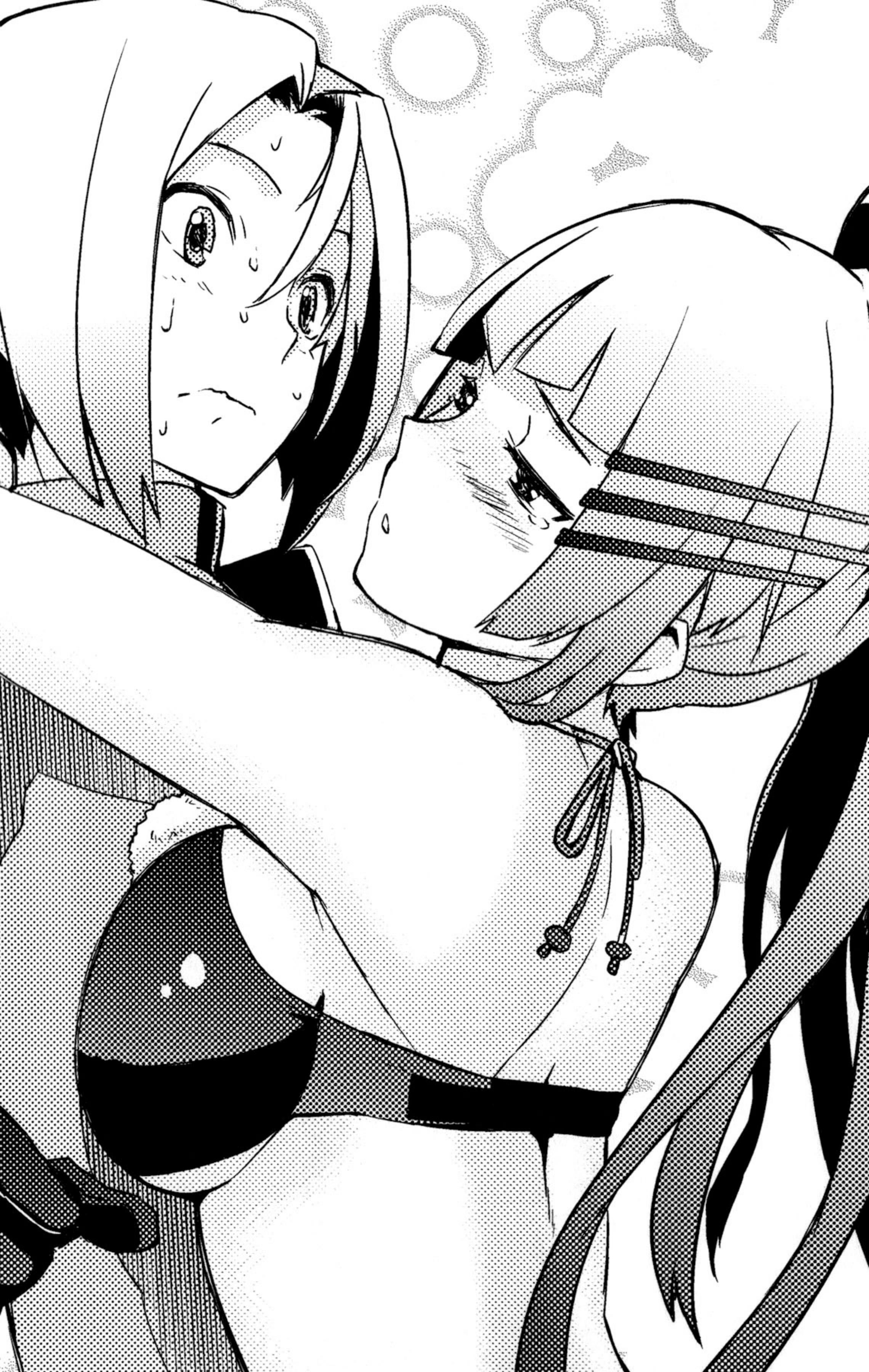
Quenser's thoughts completely stopped for an instant.

That was not the role of the cruel commander known as Froleytia. That was a line suited for a timid childhood friend who always carries around a stuffed animal.

But he realized what was happening shortly thereafter.

"I-Is she the type that gets sad when she drinks!?"

"Are you mad, Quenser? Are you? I'm so sorry I'm such a terrible commander. I'm sorry I always need you to save me. I know it isn't right. If I did a better job and used the princess to her full potential..."



"Wait, wait!! You can't get like this in front of people!! This is where people will half-jokingly take cell phone pictures, so you need to have some self-control!!"

"...Are you mad, Quenser?"

"Gyaahhh!! Don't press up against me like that!! Don't wrap your arms around my neck!! Have you forgotten how you're dressed!?"

"...You're mad..."

"I'm not!! I'm not mad!! Dammit, I have no other option while in public like this! I wouldn't really, but if we were alone I could probably get away with all sorts of things!!"

"You really aren't mad?"

"I'm not!! Really! Trust me!!"

"..."

Froleytia pressed her large breasts forcefully against him and brought her face in so close he probably could have kissed her had he simply pursed his lips, but she fell silent and did nothing further.

This all placed a tremendous mental burden on Quenser, but Froleytia finally spoke once she had worked something out in her mind.

"Quenser...you're something like a big brother to me."

"You're a little sister character now!?"

Part 7

Meanwhile, Heivia Winchell was running through the "city" as the sun began to set.

The situation was as follows:

While the blue taxi waited at a simple traffic signal of the sort used at construction sites, a middle-aged man dove in from the side with enough force to break the window.

"What the hell? Why do things like this always have to happen to me!?"

Thinking the man might be a robber, Heivia pulled out a large handgun from the holster at his waist, but then the man spoke while bleeding from the face.

"You're a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier, right!?"

"What?"

"I have something to report! I've run across some terrible information. You need to do something!!"

"Wait, wait, wait. No!! The peace of Oceania is for police special forces to deal with, not the military. This isn't my job! And more importantly, I'm on my way to see a huge-breasted Santa!! This is no time to be dealing with—...!!"

"The Legitimacy Kingdom is their target!!"

"Seriously!? But it's still not my jo—..."

"And the ones chasing me will be here soon."

"Tell me that part first!!"

Heivia frantically pulled the middle-aged man out of the taxi and fled into the congested traffic. Just as he did, the blue taxi was turned to Swiss cheese by gunfire from multiple submachine guns. The driver had fled the instant the middle-aged man had jumped in so he was not hurt, but Heivia still did not like it.

As they ran, the middle-aged man said, "You can call me Royce. I'm an Information Alliance journalist."

"No, don't introduce yourself!! That almost guarantees I'll be forced into getting involved in this!! Also, I don't want to be on a first name basis with someone I just met when it's a guy!"

"I would like to hand this off to you and get back to my normal life."

"If you try to force this onto me and run off, I will ignore all war treaties and shoot you in the back!!"

It seemed Royce's pursuers were following him in a vehicle. That gave them speed, but prevented them from making tight turns among the crowds of people and impromptu buildings. They realized the disadvantage the vehicle gave them and got out, but Heivia and Royce had gotten quite a ways away by then.

The two decided they had lost the enemy for the moment, so they exchanged information.

"So why is an Information Alliance journalist here?"

"Both for business and private reasons." As he spoke, Royce lightly touched the cell phone hanging from a strap around his neck. "My daughter was deployed here. I wanted to see what kind of place it was for myself."

"Deployed? So is she in the military?"

Heivia looked skeptical, but he then recalled that he himself was a minor out on the battlefield due to the situation in his noble family. The average age of those in the military had dropped, so it was not too surprising.

The reason Royce was subconsciously toying with his cell phone may have been because he had its background set to a photo of his daughter.

"Yes, and she hasn't even entered junior high school yet. She may be a bit too skilled," said the self-proclaimed journalist. "At her age, she should still be dreaming of being a princess of the Legitimacy Kingdom... The adults around her egg her on just for fun which has led to her domineering speech patterns and laugh. The way things are going, she will keep laughing loudly on top of the stage forever. I have no idea how she acts within her unit, though."

"Does that have anything to do with why you are being chased?"

"No, the current situation has to do with my job."

"What were you doing?"

"My original goal was to do some civilian level research into whether the Information Alliance military is performing its duties suitably. That said, all I can really do is intercept radio transmissions."

Hearing that, a bitter look appeared on Heivia's face.

"Did you pick up someone else's transmission?"

"It wasn't from any of the world powers. It was from an anti-establishment group. It seems they are opposed to the overwhelming firepower of Objects, and my curiosity got the

better of me. I analyzed the signal and located a base of theirs. They noticed me when I was observing it from afar. And you can see where that got me."

"An anti-Object group," muttered Heivia in annoyance.

He knew people with those views existed all around the world and he could hardly deny that the destruction of the Oceanian military nation had caused such sentiments to spread. Also, Quenser and Heivia...or rather, the stories of them destroying Objects had pumped vitality into the anti-Object groups whether the two boys wanted it or not.

"So these people want to destroy an Object, and they just so happened to choose our Legitimacy Kingdom Object as their target ?"

"If the information I intercepted is correct, yes."

"How do they plan to do it?" asked Heivia. "Destroying an Object is easier said than done. Even if they attack it while it sits motionlessly in the maintenance area, they aren't likely to even damage it. Even if they hit it directly with a large H-bomb, they can't get through that armor. How are they going to destroy that monstrous weapon?"

"There is a way," cut in Royce. "If there wasn't, I would not be working this hard to stop them...and they would not bother hunting me down to stop me."

Part 8

While wearing her usual special suit, the princess had headed to an impromptu arcade a bit away from where the party was being held. A tent had been set up to create a roof and several arcade machines were lined up underneath.

She had intended to spend only 10 or 20 minutes there to kill time until the party began.

However, the game she had chosen turned out to be a one-on-one multiplayer action game with an Object theme. Among all the Objects of various affiliations, the Baby Magnum had unfairly (or so she felt) low parameters in the game. Also, there was something about her opponent sitting at the machine opposite hers that bugged her. As such, the princess was unable to stop playing.

Because the two competing machines were facing each other, she could not see her opponent's face.

That meant her opponent could not see her either.

However...

"Oh ho ho!! Oh ho ho ho ho ho!! It seems you truly cannot stand up to the Gatling 033!! The specs of the original model and – more importantly – the view the people hold of it are simply that much greater!!"

"This game was made by the Information Alliance, so it is not surprising that the parameters would be skewed in their favor!! In fact, you should be ashamed of being unable to step into the ring without such handicaps!!"

"Oh? I have no idea who you are, but you must be truly unrefined to support that unrefined Legitimacy Kingdom Elite! Oh ho ho!!"

"I have no clue who you are, but no sane person would give any praise to that Information Alliance Elite!!"

The Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance bodyguards hiding around the area using the two arcade machines as their defensive lines sensed that a firefight could break out at any moment. Nevertheless, both sides had the same thought in almost perfect unison.

...I don't care who wins this game, but please end it so we can be freed from this job.

At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito of the Information Alliance held a video camera in one hand as she filmed the back of her unit's Elite who was giving that arcade game her all.

The silver-haired, brown-skinned woman had completely lost her usual look of a formidable tactician.

"Oh, dear. 50 wins and 53 losses. Is she finally losing her focus? Ah. It looks like she lost interest in the game and is walking off. No , stop shaking that cute butt like you're a baby duck. You're going to fall, you're going to fall. Ah! You fell. Oh, dear..."

A female subordinate of Lieutenant Colonel Lendy's cut in with some advice while making sure to stay out of the frame of the video camera footage. (She knew getting caught in frame would lead to a truly horrible fate.)

"Umm, I know this is something like being a doting parent, but you should not be filming her even if you are her commander. The Elite herself is considered valuable information by the military."

"What are you saying? Looking after the pilot Elite's mental health is part of our job. We cannot peer into people's hearts, so we have to gather that information from their everyday casual behavior," replied Lendy without hesitation. "By the way, why are you wearing a maid uniform?"

"Because I am a Capitalist Corporations mercenary. I do not want to have to carry around a sign all the time."

The blonde-haired, brown-skinned "mercenary" girl also had cat ears on her head.

However, Lendy was too focused on filming the Elite to look over at the "mercenary".

When the target of her filming headed off and hid behind something, she finally stopped filming.

"Huh? Where are you headed?" asked the "mercenary".

"Somewhere where maids and mercenaries are not needed."

Lendy Farolito pouted her lips, but still acted based on the information she had collected beforehand like anyone from the Information Alliance would.

"I am a bit upset with that Legitimacy Kingdom unit that keeps taking advantage of that poor girl."

Part 9

Three men carrying submachine guns with a caliber of over 5mm came to one section of the "cityscape". They were there to eliminate Heivia and Royce who had fled.

The "cityscape" was primarily a collection of tents and RVs, so it contained little that was sturdy enough to use as a shield in a firefight.

However, there were some exceptions.

For example, the area the trash was collected in.

A number of mining dump trucks made of steel were parked on the outskirts. For a fee, the trash from the area was gathered there. Afterwards, it was taken to a proper incinerator in one of the actual cities.

As the dump trucks were the type usually used for mining, they were as tall as a three story building. The tires were taller than a person and a twisting staircase was needed to reach the driver's seat. With a number of them lined up, the area was essentially surrounded by steel.

In the midst of it all, repeated short gunshots rang out.

The garbage men ran off, but the three men paid them no heed.

"(Kicker, Nexa. We need to escape afterwards, so we can't spend more than 5 minutes here. We need to finish this!!)"

"(But that guy has a rifle. His range is too great!)"

"(I'll fire like crazy to keep him in place. You two circle around behind the dump truck and shoot him!!)"

Suddenly, the sound of the gunshots coming from behind the dump truck changed. The noise was much higher-pitched and more cheap-sounding than before.

(He switched from his rifle to his side arm?)

As soon as they came to that conclusion, the three men moved forward to take the offensive.

"(He's out of ammo! We can overwhelm him now...)"

A strong, deep gunshot rang out and Nexa's head was smashed to pieces.

"Wha—...?"

While still in shock, two more bullets blasted into Kicker's gut and chest, knocking him to the ground.

The gunshots had most certainly not belonged to a handgun.

They had been the louder gunshots of the rifle that had supposedly run out of ammo.

(Shit! Did he purposefully switch over to his handgun despite having rifle ammo left to throw us off our guard!?)

The last remaining man tried to fall back, but it was too late.

With the advantage of numbers lost, the range and power difference between an assault rifle and a submachine gun was just too great.

Heivia Winchell silently drew closer without allowing even the slightest chance of a counterattack.

"You were right," said Heivia to Royce as he looked through the contents of the handheld device he had found in the armed men's belongings. "They've prepared a chemical combustion warhead. It's a bomb that mixes together naphtha, various fuels, and some chemicals to create flames that cannot be put out with water and spreads those flames 3 to 5 kilometers in every direction."

"It's basically the same thing as a Molotov cocktail. I've seen videos of it online."

"The warhead appears to be handmade, but the cruise missile it's loaded in and the mobile launcher are both Oceanian. The military regime had tanks and fighters deployed to areas around the country excluding where they had the Generation 0.5, so there was no lack of such items."

"The Craft Salamander III?"

"Sounds like some bland convenience store cream pasta, doesn't it? Well, weapon names have to be brought down to a level where even an idiot gets it. The point is to show off your obvious hostility ," said Heivia as a cruel smile came to his lips. "The maximum range should be 1500 km. I believe it has a terrain calculation guidance system."

The one remaining question was how they planned to destroy an Object with it.

Even a direct hit from a large hydrogen bomb would not destroy an Object's armor. Also, chemical combustion warheads were anti-personnel weapons. Heivia did not see how one could destroy an Object.

Royce answered that question.

"Most likely, their target is not the Object itself."

"What?"

"Basically, they just have to make the Object unusable. And they can do that without attacking the thick armor of the Object. They can accomplish their goal by targeting the much more vulnerable human beings."

"...Are they after the Elite?"

It was not entirely impossible, but Heivia was still skeptical.

Anyone could tell there was a danger of an Elite being targeted when outside of the Object. That was why they always had a special unit of bodyguards with them and were constantly accompanied by an armored vehicle with a perfectly air tight interior in case of firefights, explosives, or chemical and biological weapons.

Even if a cruise missile loaded with a chemical combustion warhead was headed straight for the Elite, she simply had to climb aboard that armored vehicle the instant it was detected. That would negate any damage from heat or smoke.

"No," replied Royce. "Their target is the maintenance soldiers. It does not matter if they do not have any particularly important duties or information. The chemical combustion warhead can cover several kilometers in every direction with flames. If the maintenance soldiers are gathered in a single place, a large majority can be eliminated. If hundreds of maintenance soldiers are lost all at once, the Object can no longer function. Even if it still has a pilot and a commander, the Object cannot function without those at the bottom who keep it running."

"So they're stopping it by destroying the Object's surroundings rather than the Object itself, hm?"

However, something bothered Heivia about that.

(That isn't too different from our idea to destroy that computer in the Loyauté district.)

That gave Heivia a bad feeling, but he continued the conversation.

"The crucial Elite and commander are one thing, but the unit can hardly have bodyguards for every single maintenance soldier. They might actually have a chance if they really are trying to crush them all at once." Heivia thought for a bit and then changed the subject slightly. "Since they prepared the mobile launcher and cruise missile, they are probably planning to detonate it in midair."

"I would assume so. If it is not detonated in midair, its effects would not spread as far. ...But I only know what I was able to find on military websites."

"The Craft Salamander III," said Heivia. "From the range of the missile, and the locations of the city and the maintenance base, they will most likely be targeting the maintenance base zone and the cityscape spread out around it. ...Hah. It seems they aren't directly targeting anyone from your Information Alliance."

"So? What I must do remains the same."

"Why would you help protect a Legitimacy Kingdom military facility?"

"I have both business and private reasons for that." Royce wiped sweat from his face. "As a journalist, I cannot simply sit by doing nothing as a threat like this approaches the people of Oceania. If spreading information would increase the danger, temporarily holding it back is good manners, but that does apply here. However, spreading the information now would not give people enough time to evacuate, so I feel I should use the information I have received in a different way in order to avert this catastrophe."

"And what is your private reason?"

"I told you my daughter has been deployed to Oceania, remember? Preserving the concept of the clean battlefield will help preserve the safety of my daughter. I cannot have that concept lost due to some terrorist attack."

"I see," muttered Heivia.

He could trust a real reason like that much more than some sterilized "for the greater good" reason.

"We need to find out where the launcher is located," said Heivia in a low voice. "If we know that, we can try to attack before the missile is launched or intercept it if it has already launched."

"Fine, but we have no time," said Royce to make sure Heivia understood. "From the fragments of information I picked up over

the radio, their attack is going to begin soon. It is probably because the majority of the group is preparing the attack that we had so few pursuers."

Part 10

After wasting more time than she had expected at the arcade, the princess walked along the tent-filled "cityscape" on the way to the Legitimacy Kingdom party.

The Legitimacy Kingdom bodyguards were still spread out around her and an armored vehicle also accompanied her, but she still decided to travel on foot.

The unorganized layout of the tents and forceful flow of pedestrian traffic prevented the smooth travel of the vehicle. She felt she would make better time on foot.

The princess recalled the exchange she had had back in the arcade.

To the very end, she had never seen her opponent's face.

(Honestly. I do not know if that was some sightseer from the Information Alliance or what, but the way they control all information about Elites and treat them like idols is like some kind of creepy brainwashing.)

The Legitimacy Kingdom treated their own Elites like patriotic heroes and rallied support from the people by spreading doubtful stories about them being part of legendary bloodlines that stretch

hundreds of years into the past. Both were completely ridiculous ways to treat them, but it is hard to notice how odd the environment one has been immersed in all one's life is. It was similar to not noticing the smell of one's own house.

As the princess walked among all the tents and RVs, she suddenly stopped.

Her bodyguards all thought "Don't tell me there's something else!?", but the target of their protection had the right to choose what she did.

The princess looked over at a store filled with joke goods.

Due to the season, it contained a lot of Christmas-themed trees, wreaths, and red boots. It also had some Santa Claus costumes for sale.

(...)

When she had gone swimming earlier that day, Quenser had seemed incredibly disappointed for some reason.

She still had no idea what he had been hoping for, but it seemed wearing her work outfit while on leave was not the right thing to do.

She guessed it had something to do with everything having a proper time and place.

"Santa Claus... Santa Claus," muttered the princess as she headed into the store.

The tanned shop owner seemed especially courteous because she was wearing the special suit of an Elite. That meant she was the representative of a nation which in turn meant she would have a lot of money.

He was not wrong in that line of thinking, but the princess had no interest in money and so she had no idea how much money she had in her bank account.

The princess's bodyguards starting showing an interest in her actions as they secretly began to wonder, "Oh, is our princess finally awakening to her sex appeal?"

"Could you put together a Santa Claus outfit for me?" she asked.

What she got in return was an overly standard Santa Claus outfit made up of a baggy red shirt, pants of the same color, and a fake white beard.

"Don't go with that boring thing!!" shouted the bodyguards in their hearts, but that expressionless girl was not going to absorb the ideas of Japanese moe so quickly.

However, the look in the princess's eyes changed when she glanced over at a 3D monitor that used diffraction sitting in a corner of the tent.

It was playing footage from an Information Alliance idol Elite's concert from a few days ago.

"Yayyy!! This may be a bit early, but I think I will give you the gift of a night of dreams about a sexy miniskirt Santa!! Oh ho ho!!"

It was unclear how much of the footage was real and how much was VFX, but the image underwent a dazzling change. The blonde ringlet curl, G-cup idol shook her body while wearing a red and white Santa costume that appeared to be a modified Elite special suit.

For a while, the princess's expression grew even more expressionless than usual, but she finally pointed at the screen and spoke to the shop owner.

"Give me something that outdoes that."

After being transformed into a miniskirt Santa for the tropical southern hemisphere, the princess headed to the Legitimacy Kingdom party.

(This does not seem like a very practical outfit.)

The princess looked down at her clothes.

(Well, as long as Quenser likes it. But will he really like this???)

The party seemed to have already begun. The Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers had divided up into groups where they chatted as they drank and ate. Everyone's eyes turned toward the princess and they subsequently did nothing but stare at her. The princess could not tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing that they were acting like they had seen something they could not believe.

(Where is Quenser?)

After glancing around, the princess spotted the person she was looking for at one end of the party.

However...

"It's not the same!! My actual siblings may try not to hurt my feelings, but they never say anything against how my family treats me!! You're the only one that does, Quenser!! I was saying that you're the most like a big brother to me!!"

The princess froze in place when she spotted Froleytia dead drunk and Quenser being held tightly by that large-breasted commander.

Also...

At that time, Lendy Farolito arrived at the party.

The mood of the Legitimacy Kingdom party was naturally ruined at the arrival of an enemy officer accompanied by Information Alliance soldiers. It was a potentially explosive situation, but they were in a cooperative relationship due to the coalition and the party was not located within the Legitimacy Kingdom base.

They had no legitimate reason to turn her away.

Lendy herself had not hesitated to head into the party because she was well aware of that.

An Information Alliance commander had arrived.

How would the Legitimacy Kingdom commander react?

Naturally, everyone's attention turned to Froleytia.

"I won't let you have him!! Quenser is my big brother and I won't let anyone else have him!!"

"Remember your position here. I'm the small, cute one."

A large-breasted miniskirt bikini Santa and an expressionless miniskirt Santa were fighting over a single boy. Lendy Farolito froze in place when she saw the Legitimacy Kingdom major who was otherwise occupied.

And then...

"Outta the way!!"

"Oh, man. This catfight will make an excellent gamble!!"

"Yeah, it's not like any of us would ever have a chance with beauties whose positions and ranks are so much higher than ours."

A portion of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers who saw the fight as a chance to make some money quickly moved to the center of the disturbance and circled them. Lendy's path to the other commander was lost.

(I took a risk and tried to contact her in a way that would garner as much attention as possible, but they aren't paying any attention to me!!)

The Information Alliance found value in the authenticity of information and in the methods used to disseminate and acquire such information, so that was a regretful turn of events.

When Lendy realized the person Froleytia had both her arms latched onto was the very same combat engineer boy that had secretly drawn the attention of a certain Information Alliance Elite, Lendy's emotions quickly reached their limit.

"Y-You womanizer!!"

"Now someone I don't even know is giving me an incredible title!! If I ever get business cards made, I'm definitely putting that one on there!!"

Froleytia then realized Quenser's attention had turned toward someone other than herself.

"Who the hell are you? ...I won't let you have Quenser! He's my big brother!!"

"I do not wish to have him!!" shouted Lendy while just barely managing to remain civil. "One of your men has been taking advantage of our Elite, so I thought I would stop by in the name of scouting him while actually having some fun throwing your human relations out of order. I never thought he was this dangerous, though... I must report this. I need to have a family meeting with that girl tonigh—...cough cough!!"

Lendy started choking a bit from yelling too much and reached over for a drink, but no civilian waiter was walking nearby.

Froleytia grabbed a glass filled with a clear liquid.

"Here, have some water. Honestly, can't you do anything for yourself?" she grumbled.

"Hm? That glass..."

The combat engineer boy being held by Froleytia seemed to realize something, but Lendy had already gulped down the contents of the glass.

And...

"Cough!? Cough cough!! Th-This isn't water! It's vodka!!"

"What!? How dare you refuse to drink the water my big brother prepared!"

"Damn you. You have some nerve to do this to an officer from the Information Alliance where the truth and untruth of information is directly linked to right and wrong..."

The expressionless miniskirt Santa then passed her another drink.

"Calm down. Have another glass to wash the bad taste out of your mouth."

"Oh, excellent idea. I think I can actually trust yo—...bbhh!! Th-Th-This one is shochu!? Hic."

Her complaint suddenly trailed off.

Just as Quenser started to get a very bad feeling about what was to come...

"And another thing!!" shouted Lendy.

"Wah!?"

"What are you thinking!? You're tearing down the framework of the Information Alliance and Legitimacy Kingdom for that poor girl!! Do you understand how much of an incredible tragedy this is for her!?"

As Lendy Farolito approached with long strides, Froleytia seemed to sense some kind of danger.

She squeezed herself against Quenser even harder than before.

"I won't let you have my big brother!!"

"I didn't say anything to you!! I was clearly speaking to that womanizer!"

"Don't look at her, Quenser! Look at me!!"

"Out of the way, drunk!! I need to lecture that womanizer!!"

Despite their words being directed at Quenser, the two drunks were looking only at each other.

"..."

All the while, the princess increased her wordless and expressionless intimidating presence.

A veritable storm was brewing.

Quenser could clearly feel it coming, so he tried to come up with a way to have the situation settle down. With how the princess looked subtly displeased while secretly entering dangerous territory, Quenser doubted she fit into any existing category of Japanese moe, but he had to do something about the danger before his eyes instead of focusing on that.

"W-Wait, you two. Why don't you calm dow—..."

"I hope you're prepared to fight!!"

"If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get!!"

With that exchange that seemed more a form of a greeting than the beginning of a fight, Froleytia Capistrano and Lendy Farolito began glaring at each other at extremely close range.

That was when the soldiers of the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance witnessed a bizarre phenomenon.

They could not explain it with any standard means.

The boy who had come to the battlefield to study Object design had his head disappear.

Or to be more accurate...

His head was completely buried in the large breasts of the two women grabbing at him.

Part 11

Given the situation, Heivia and Royce had to act on their own, but they had no real reason to keep the information to themselves.

As they took action, they contacted the police special forces and a Legitimacy Kingdom Object other than the Baby Magnum and its Mobile Maintenance Battalion. They made a request for the Object to prepare its anti-air lasers. If Heivia had gotten Froleytia to do that, it probably would have gone a lot smoother though.

And then...

They heard a major change to the situation come in via a radio transmission.

"Speed Killer is ready. We can use the anti-air lasers at any time. Even if a cruise missile is fired at the city, we can intercept it with 97% accuracy."

"Wait, wait!!"

"According to the satellite, the mobile launcher is located 20 kilometers northwest of where the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion is stationed. If we know the starting point and ending point, we know its flight path. There is no way it will slip past us."

"Is this information correct!? Are you sure their cruise missile is targeting that convoy of some VIPs travelling 30 kilometers southeast of here and not the maintenance soldiers scattered throughout the impromptu cityscape!?"

"It seems they are conversing over cell phones that use a civilian satellite as well as via normal radio. However, we have people with special devices to intercept those signals. We got the information from there. There is no mistaking this."

"And..." Heivia chose his words carefully. "Is there also no mistaking the fact that the Object's anti-air laser defense is set to shoot down the cruise missile halfway through its flight?"

"Halfway? ...That would mean it's right above the impromptu cityscape!" shouted Royce, but Heivia had already figured out what they were after when he had asked the question.

The commander in charge of the Speed Killer replied, "The convoy being targeted is carrying a lieutenant general and a brigadier general. That chemical combustion warhead must be shot down."

"..."

"A chemical combustion warhead only has its intended effects when the proper materials are mixed together and mixed with the air upon detonation at the proper altitude. If it is shot down by an anti-air laser, there is almost no chance of a large, several kilometer explosion occurring."

"But there is still some chance, right?"

"Even so," immediately replied the commander. "The Elite and commander will have airtight armored vehicles accompanying them that can withstand biological and chemical weapons. As long as the bare minimum is protected, that is all that matters. And of course the Object itself will not be destroyed by anything of that level. Also, I am putting you under a gag order to prevent a panic. Any further communications are—..."

Heivia clicked his tongue and switched off his radio.

Royce then shouted at him with such force that he almost grabbed at the boy.

"What is going on!? Are they planning to let everyone in this city die? And if those airtight armored vehicles can withstand the heat and flames, what does it matter if the cruise missile directly hits that convoy!?"

"Don't ask me. He was probably forced into this decision by those higher officers. ...And I get the feeling this is exactly what the ones using the chemical combustion warhead want."

"?"

"They used the satellite cell phones to purposefully allow the military to intercept the transmissions. As they expected, the military plans to set up a defensive line to shoot the missile down halfway through its flight. ...And that is in the perfect spot to roast all the maintenance soldiers in my unit as you predicted."

"It can't be...But that means..."

"If you simply shoot a cruise missile in Oceania, one of the many Objects will shoot it down before it reaches its target. But that just means you have to create a plan based on the assumption it will get shot down."

"But that horrible commander said the odds are low a large explosion will occur if the cruise missile is shot down with an anti-air laser!"

"If they know it will be shot down, they can change those odds," Heivia searched through the handheld device belonging to one of the armed men he had shot. "I saw this diagram of the warhead before, but now that I look closer, something is off about it. The different chemicals are packaged separately. If it reached its target like this, nothing would happen."

"Wait, you mean the chemicals will only be mixed together in midair if it it's shot down?"

"From this design, I'd say they want it shot down. The chemicals are stored under high pressure which I guess is to ensure they scatter everywhere when the container bursts. If we leave this to the Object's anti-air lasers, this city will be swallowed up in a sea of flames!!"

They knew where the enemy's mobile launcher was.

Without getting permission, Heivia borrowed a Legitimacy Kingdom off-road vehicle that was parked on the road with the key in the ignition.

Royce shouted, "What are you going to do!?"

"Isn't it obvious? We came this far on our own, so we just have to finish it that way!! Royce, if you want to help, fill that drum up with gasoline!!"

Royce followed Heivia's instructions, but he still had questions.

He climbed into the passenger seat of the off-road vehicle and they drove out of the impromptu city.

"I know we have to stop this, but do you really think we can destroy that mobile launcher!? We had enough trouble with just those 3 pursuers. Their main force is going to be concentrated around that launcher!!"

"Shut up! We don't have time!!"

A cloud of sand blew into the air as the off-road vehicle drove off into a dry wasteland.

They were still 20 kilometers from the mobile launcher.

The armed group would have its firepower concentrated around that launcher. Also, they had no reason to wait. They would be launching the cruise missile as soon as possible.

"Shit! That light!!" shouted Royce.

A bright flash of light could be seen beyond the horizon and a signal flare-like point of light shot up into the night sky. However, the distances were simply too great. A signal flare would not produce enough light.

"They fired it!! That was the cruise missile loaded with the chemical combustion warhead!!"

"Tch. Can we make it in time!?"

Heivia slammed on the brakes and drove in an S-pattern as the tires slid. In the end, he finally managed to stop the off-road vehicle safely.

He then jumped down onto the sandy ground.

"We weren't on our way to attack the armed group and destroy the launcher!?"

"I never thought we would make it in time for that!!" shouted back Heivia, bringing a look of shock to Royce's face.

Royce then thought Heivia must have been running away before the explosion to save himself, but Heivia headed to the back of the off-road vehicle.

"As long as we keep the missile from continuing on its intended course, we can prevent the impromptu cityscape and the maintenance soldiers from being sacrificed! If it flies off in some other direction, their plan involving the anti-air laser will fail!!"

"Are you planning to jam it?"

"The Craft Salamander III's guidance system uses terrain calculations. It measures the ups and downs of the terrain it passes over to determine what corrections need to be made to its course. As long as it has 3-5 pages of documentation on the terrain between the launch point and the arrival point, it can aim itself quite accurately."

"Does that documentation come from satellite photos?"

"Normally. Simple aerial photos should work just as well. But in that case, the documentation cannot be updated in real time, so it all has to be researched beforehand and the launch location cannot be changed," explained Heivia. "Naturally, if aerial photos to determine its course are inputted, no communication is needed after launch. While GPS navigation requires a constant exchange of information with the satellite, this method has no risk of being stopped with jamming."

"Then what can we do!? How are we supposed to oppose a cruise missile flying at supersonic speeds!? Don't tell me you plan to aim your rifle into the air and shoot it down!!"

"I'll be doing something a little flashier than that."

Heivia used both hands to pick up the drum filled with gasoline that had been loaded in the off-road vehicle.

He opened the large metal container, tipped it over, and spread the gasoline around the wasteland.

"Be mindful of the wind. It can carry vaporized gasoline."

"What are you doing? The cruise missile is already in the air!! It will pass by overhead before too long!!"

"As I said, the Craft Salamander III's guidance system uses terrain calculations. It periodically compares the data held in its chips to the actual ups and downs of the terrain below it to correct its course." After the last of the gasoline had left the drum, Heivia casually threw the empty container to the side. "That just means we have to make sure it can't compare the two sets of data."

He then pulled out a cigar lighter from the driver's seat of the off-road vehicle.

He glanced out at the hot, red ground.

"We just have to do something like this!!"

The instant after Heivia threw the cigar lighter, a giant explosion filled a portion of the wasteland.

In an instant, a massive amount of light and heat was produced along with a shockwave.

Afterwards, black smoke rose up into the night sky. The black smoke filled the entire area the explosion had encompassed.

A white point of light shot by above their heads with tremendous speed.

"What? That isn't the right direction."

"The flash of light and the smoke prevented it from checking on the terrain," said Heivia as he held a hand in front of his face to protect his eyes from the orange light. "If it can't correct its course, there's nothing to worry about. Now we just have to wait for the Speed Killer to deal with it. It doesn't matter if the anti-air laser brings the chemical combustion warhead down over empty desert. " He collapsed into a sitting position and wiped sweat from his brow. "I can get things done too when I don't have to face one of those monstrous weapons."

Part 12

After saving the Oceanian people and the rest of his mobile maintenance battalion, Private First Class Heivia Winchell finally made it to the Christmas party.

"I made it...I finally made it to utopia!! Thank you, me!! The great Heivia is simply too powerful!! Now, time to eat, drink, and enjoy the view of a huge-breasted Santa!! We're gonna have some fun tonight and maybe have some enjoyable incidents to keep as memories!!"

But...

The large table that should have had plenty of food lined up on it was covered in nothing but large, empty plates. The plates had a

bit of red sauce on them, but the waiters were in the process of removing them from the table.

No food or drink could be found.

Heivia refused to accept that truth and shook his head.

"Don't tell me it's already ov—...No, no, not yet!! The most important part is still left! Santa's time to shine is after all the good children have gone to bed!! There has to be one around here somewhere. After overcoming all that danger, there has to be some reward for me!!"

Heivia searched around the party area with his eyes as wide as plates, but he found nothing but waiters cleaning up. Every single one of the soldiers who had surely been celebrating there had left and a huge-breasted Santa was nothing but a dream within a dream. Heivia could not even spot a single waitress.

For an instant, Heivia's face lost all expression.

But in the next instant, his face twisted as if he was about to cry tears of blood and he shouted, "This is a desert!! This is nothing but a dried-up desert!!"

It was at that moment that Heivia spotted Quenser Barbotage trudging toward him with legs just as unsteady as Heivia's. Seeing his companion's face, Heivia brought up his guard.

"Don't tell me you had to head through a battlefield of your own. No, wait!! I was the hero tonight! I'm the most exhausted!

And that's why the biggest reward should go to me!! I won't give any of it up even to you!!"

However, Quenser was too far gone to hear him.

Before he made it over to Heivia, Quenser collapsed down onto the hardened sand of the ground. Heivia approached in confusion and Quenser tried to speak with his mouth moving open and closed.

"Ti..."

"What is it, Quenser? 'Ti'? What do you mean 'ti'!?"

"...Tits village..."

All strength left Quenser's body and his face grew even paler. Heivia let out a cry of lamentation.

"What kind of dying message is that!? There's too much deep meaning there!! What happened? Hey, Quenser! Quenseeeeeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!"

Chapter 3: The Treasure of the Sea Dyed Deep Red >> Defensive Battle in the Solomon District

Part 1

His name was Cardinal Roybelz Oldnick of the Faith Organization.

"So he was the idiot that made those problematic statements," muttered Froleytia as she looked at the photo displayed on her laptop while distracted by her hangover headache.

While she was alone in the officer room, she was not speaking to herself. A voice chat application was running on the laptop.

Instead of someone from the military, she was speaking with the aide of a politician who dealt with diplomatic issues back in the home country. Basically, the situation had grown complicated enough that a politician like that had to get involved.

An elderly voice spoke over the voice chat, "The Faith Organization began by advocating any and all religions. The religious power that lost the most in that deal was the Christian church. After all, when religions of an older era are revived, the amount of land and number of people they have effective control over will become further divided. It was only natural that some spoke up in fears of their power weakening."

In reality, they were not having their power taken away from them. Instead, the balance of power was being restored to how it

had once been. However, after 2000 years had passed, they no longer saw it that way.

Froleytia put her long, narrow kiseru in her mouth and said, "So this cardinal who feared losing his power took control of the military and went nuts. He caused a civil war with a Greek power and ended up being utterly defeated in a counterattack."

"It sounds simple enough when you put it like that, but over 5000 people died in the process. The conflict did not fall within the boundaries of a clean war. A lot of civilians from safe countries charged into the battlefield based on some inappropriate remarks he made."

"Yes, and Oldnick says he merely said the words and he cannot be held responsible for how people interpreted them. What a joke."

The words of those with power would spread and therefore those people had to be more responsible about the things they said .

It was clear what would happen if some idiot who did not understand that repeatedly made careless statements during a time of war.

Oldnick was a truly dangerous speaker. He had made repeated inappropriate off-the-cuff statements which had led the military and civilians to take action. Many had died from this, but Oldnick only made worse and worse statements when he tried to explain away his previous statements and escape any blame. It all continued to escalate like a snowball rolling down a hill.

For someone with no power, the statements would have been nothing worse than an old man finding fault with a baseball player while watching a game on TV, but things changed when it was someone with the power to move an entire nation.

"The Christian power within the Faith Organization insists the entire incident was Cardinal Roybelz Oldnick's individual actions, but they are primarily saying this to avoid further investigation from the central power of the Faith Organization. Oldnick has already been excommunicated from the Christian church, and they agreed to send Valkyrie after him as the central power suggested."

"And now this old man has started shouting even more nonsense now that he is in real danger."

"At the very least, he wants to avoid being assassinated by Valkyrie. That is how he has been acting ever since the Loyauté district."

"Does anyone really believe this nonsense about the Legitimacy Kingdom being an ally of the Christian power within the Faith Organization because the ceremonies for royalty and knights have Christian elements to them?"

"If any idiot truly believes that, they need to be taken to the hospital immediately. However, there are plenty of people who will claim it is true to take advantage of the situation. These people think this skirmish is an excellent opportunity to attack some Objects."

Even in a clean war, a battle between Objects was still expensive .

Part of war was striking a balance between income and expenditures. If that could not be done, the idea of the clean war would come crumbling down.

The elderly voice said, "We do not wish for people to head to war based on the nonsense coming from this cardinal. Even if a conflict with the Faith Organization cannot be avoided outright, we would like for it to be based on something with more value to us."

"So..."

"We need you to quickly silence this problematic statement emitter. You have three days. How you eliminate him does not matter so long as his identity can be confirmed via DNA."

Part 2

"So even our Christmas break went exactly as the higher ups had planned."

Quenser and Heivia were speaking within the Baby Magnum's maintenance area.

The princess was listening in with as little expression on her face as ever.

"This Cardinal Oldnick had contacted Hyena from the Loyauté district. Some data we found in their headquarters after blowing them away made that clear enough."

"But why? I would think a cardinal would insist on keeping things clean. Would he really contact a group that is using the restoration of Oceania as a chance to rob people?"

"We still don't know what he's after. He's causing quite an uproar, but we still can't figure out what he hopes to achieve in the end. It's possible he's just fleeing to save his own skin," pointed out Heivia offhandedly. "It's possible he wanted to use them against the Faith Organization's Valkyrie. Those grim reapers are quite something, but they're still flesh-and-blood soldiers. There is a chance he was planning to use Hyena to deal with Valkyrie."

However, Quenser and the rest of the Legitimacy Kingdom had eliminated Hyena before they and Valkyrie could cross paths.

Since Oldnick himself had not been turned to ash, he must have detected some kind of harbinger of the bombardment and fled.

"We know Valkyrie was lurking around the Loyauté district, but I guess he must have escaped them."

"He must have. After escaping the island, Oldnick likely tried to escape to Oceania where he could slip in amongst the confusion of restoration. With the coalition force confusing everything, a single organization has a harder time moving around than elsewhere. He probably hoped to escape to somewhere else of his choosing after losing Valkyrie in Oceania," said Quenser as he leaned up against a

large piece of machinery. "But before he could, our unit came to rest at the north end of Oceania...and that was exactly where Oldnick was expected to land. That meant he couldn't land without being blown out of the water, much less disappear into the confusion. Since we had already crushed all of Hyena after he contacted them, Oldnick would have been cautious about approaching us. Just as the higher ups hoped, he had no choice but to head north by sea."

Roybelz Oldnick was currently using a civilian charter boat to head to the Solomon district which was north of both Oceania and Loyauté.

"The reason he isn't using an airplane is likely that he is afraid of being targeted with anti-air lasers, but that changes little. Objects can travel at over 500 kph on the sea. Even if the charter boat is a high-speed hydrofoil, he can't escape."

The princess then cut in.

"By the way, Quenser."

"What?"

The princess pointed at one wall of the maintenance area and asked her question while still expressionless.

"Why is Heivia writing curses on the wall while speaking with you?"

"I honestly couldn't tell you..."

"Like hell you don't know!!" shouted Heivia while he glared at and grabbed Quenser. "I heard what happened!! I know what you were doing while I was struggling to save Oceania and our unit! You were keeping all the best parts to yourself!! Why do I keep hearing about a huge-breasted miniskirt bikini Santa!?"

"...That was a type of hell in its own way."

"You and your damn 'let them eat cake' attitude!! You monster!! Are you asking for a fight!?"

Heivia then realized that all the yelling in the world would not get rid of the empty feeling within him, so his mood dropped to a point three times lower than before.

The princess also seemed slightly miffed, but those two idiots were completely oblivious to that fact.

"I honestly think I was the hero this time. I was shining in the spotlight. That cruise missile targeting the maintenance soldiers was similar to our idea of destroying the computer in the Loyauté district to make the Object unusable. The Deep Optical's unit from the Capitalist Corporations had to be behind it somehow, so I felt like I was opening the first page of some grand epic of a story!! But now that I think back on it, something wasn't right about the whole thing! Why wasn't there a single beautiful girl in that story!! All I got was some middle-aged guy named Royce! What the hell kind of miscasting is that!?"

Suddenly, an electronic tone came from one of their radios.

However, it did not come from Quenser or Heivia's.

It came from the smaller, more expensive one used to inform the princess it was time to scramble the Object.

"What?"

"The situation has changed. Our plan was to intercept that troublesome old man as he headed north through the ocean in the Solomon district, but a Capitalist Corporations Object has appeared cutting off our route."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

"It is the Deep Optical, a Second Generation Object from the Client Security company. I had a feeling we would be engaging it in the near future, but this timing is odd. It is possible Roybelz Oldnick has some connection with them."

"What exactly is the change to the plan?" asked the princess.

"We had planned to simply have you pursue Oldnick, but we will now have you face the Deep Optical. A separate group will head after Oldnick, but I will explain it all in more detail at the pre-mission briefing."

Quenser had a question, so he simply asked it.

"Froleytia, do you think the Deep Optical is standing in our way for more than a personal grudge against us?"

He then heard an odd clattering noise come from over the radio.

It sounded like Froleytia had tried to draw back from the radio but had failed as she was sitting down. As a result, she had fallen back in her seat.

"...Qu-Quenser...You were there?"

"Um, Froleytia? Is there a prob-..."

"No!! Don't say anything!!"

For some reason Froleytia shouted back at him before he could finish speaking.

"Forget everything that happened yesterday!! I don't remember a thing, so I have no idea what I may have said, but I can tell it was something horrible from the reaction of those around me!! So don't say a single thing about it!!"

Something had been said that was causing Froleytia to blush out of delighted embarrassment. When Heivia heard that, his self control finally reached its limit and he punched Quenser.

Part 3

Quenser used the short time until the pre-mission briefing to skim through a science magazine.

The old maintenance lady walked over in annoyance.

"If you have time to read that, how about you learn about a real Object?"

"I've been feeling some desire for infidelity lately."

"?"

The old lady looked confused, but Quenser showed her a page of the science magazine.

"This is about the Capitalist Corporations' liquid prism technology. The Legitimacy Kingdom still hasn't developed that tech far enough to make a practical weapon. They say the end product ups the output of laser beams by quite a bit."

"The Legitimacy Kingdom *is* carrying out research on this. They are a standard component of laser space elevators. They are used to send lasers fired from multiple oscillators in the same direction."

"Eh? So we do have the actual technology?"

"Yes, but only when it does not have to stand up to the high speed battles Objects go through," she replied. "Liquid prisms are created by filling transparent containers with a special liquid. The inside of the container is covered with electrodes and electrochemical control of the chemical interface is used to artificially alter the concentration of the liquid. Differences in concentration are used to bend the light."

"I see. But what does that have to do with high speed battles?"

"Sudden turns cause high G forces that will disturb the liquid within the liquid prism. The artificial alterations to the concentration of liquid within the container will be undone,

bringing the liquid back to an even concentration. That is why it is difficult to put liquid prisms on an Object that makes quick movements and shakes with the firing of shells. Another problem is that the high temperatures created when the laser passes through will agitate the liquid as well," explained the old lady. " The key to the Capitalist Corporations' technology is not the liquid prism technology itself. It is the shock resistance technology and temperature countermeasures used to prevent external interference with the liquid prism. For example, they could use laser vibration detectors, fast-acting coolants, or cartridges. But even with all those technologies, an Object with a liquid prism aboard will have limited combat options. It will avoid making quick movements like our princess does. That means liquid prism technology has limited uses for Objects. Or at least it does not match the needs of our unit."

"It's a shame the technology doesn't fit in more nicely than that."

"If there was no risk to using it, Objects around the world would be using them. Also, that science magazine will only have the information they see no problem with letting the public know about. I would say there is more value in watching maintenance on an actual Object rather than reading that thing."

"It's in my nature to try to find a shortcut."

With a grumble of complaint, Quenser stood up.

Once again, it seemed his only option was the standard path.

Part 4

The pre-mission briefing began.

A projector displayed a map of the ocean in the Solomon district . Froleytia spoke as a few arrows were added on top.

"Our primary target is Roybelz Oldnick who is travelling north through the Solomon district sea. Do not forget that every action during this mission should be taken in order to carry out that objective."

However, a giant shape had interposed itself between the north of Oceania and Oldnick's boat.

"But the real danger lies in the fact that the Capitalist Corporations' Deep Optical has been deployed in order to cut off our path. Unless we do something about it, we cannot finish off Oldnick before he flees. As such, the Baby Magnum must engage the Deep Optical."

Heivia asked a question.

"Are we to remain on standby until our princess has sent the Deep Optical to rest on the bottom of the ocean? Or are we going to head after Oldnick by taking a large detour around the Object while the princess is drawing its attention?"

"That would be the best option, but we do not have time." Froleytia added an arrow pointing to the west of Oldnick's boat. " An unidentified submarine has surfaced. We do not know if it

belongs to the Deep Optical's unit or if it belongs to the remnants of Oldnick's military force, but this could become much more difficult if Oldnick's boat rendezvouses with the submarine."

"So we have to crush him before that happens. ...But how?"

Froleytia's shoulders stiffened a bit at hearing Quenser's voice, but her self control won out.

"As I said, the princess will engage the Deep Optical." Froleytia added another arrow heading right along the arrow indicating the shortest route. "But there is more to the ocean than the surface. A different group will head straight there while travelling deep under the ocean. Currently, we have no other way to catch up to Oldnick."

Froleytia drew a large circle around an area of sea even further north of where Oldnick was.

"One other thing. Just north of the operation area is an precious metal ocean mining plant financed by the Legitimacy Kingdom. Simply put, small filters are used to collect the metals dissolved into the ocean water and the metals are then condensed. The higher ups fear that valuable tungsten deposits will be lost in this battle. Make sure you do not forget that."

Part 5

After the naval battle floats were installed, the Baby Magnum travelled north from Oceania and through the Coral Sea.

The Capitalist Corporations' Deep Optical was waiting at a point that cut off its path to the Solomon district where Oldnick had fled.

This was a true battle. It was a fight to the death. And like the battles in the many wars of the past, the girl piloting the Object exchanged no words with her opponent. She did not even know if the pilot of the enemy craft was male or female.

In a way, it was a clean battle. In a way, it was an empty battle.

The two faced off at a distance of about 10 kilometers.

"The intelligence group has carried out unofficial reconnaissance operations concerning the Deep Optical, but we still do not have any complete information. Do not get carried away in attack. Keep evasion a priority at all times."

"Understood," replied the princess.

In the next moment, the Deep Optical began to move.

They were 10 kilometers apart.

The Object fired a brilliant white laser beam at that range.

"...!?"

The princess just barely managed to evade by predicting the action from the subtle movements of the targeting lenses and other equipment.

An explosive noise followed the beam of light.

The laser beam roasted the dust and moisture in the air which produced a massive amount of heat, causing the air to expand explosively.

The Deep Optical had a very unique shape. Eight legs spread out directly below its spherical main body. All eight of those legs functioned as air cushion engines so it could remain accurately level even amidst waves.

【ディープオプティカル】
DEEP OPTICAL

全長… 100メートル（主砲最大展開時）

最高速度… 時速250キロ

装甲… 2センチ×33層（溶接など不純物含む）＋
レーザー振動検知式相殺装置

用途… 対オブジェクト用駆逐兵器

分類… 海上戦闘特化型（第二世代）

運用者… 資本企業「クライアントセキュリティ社」

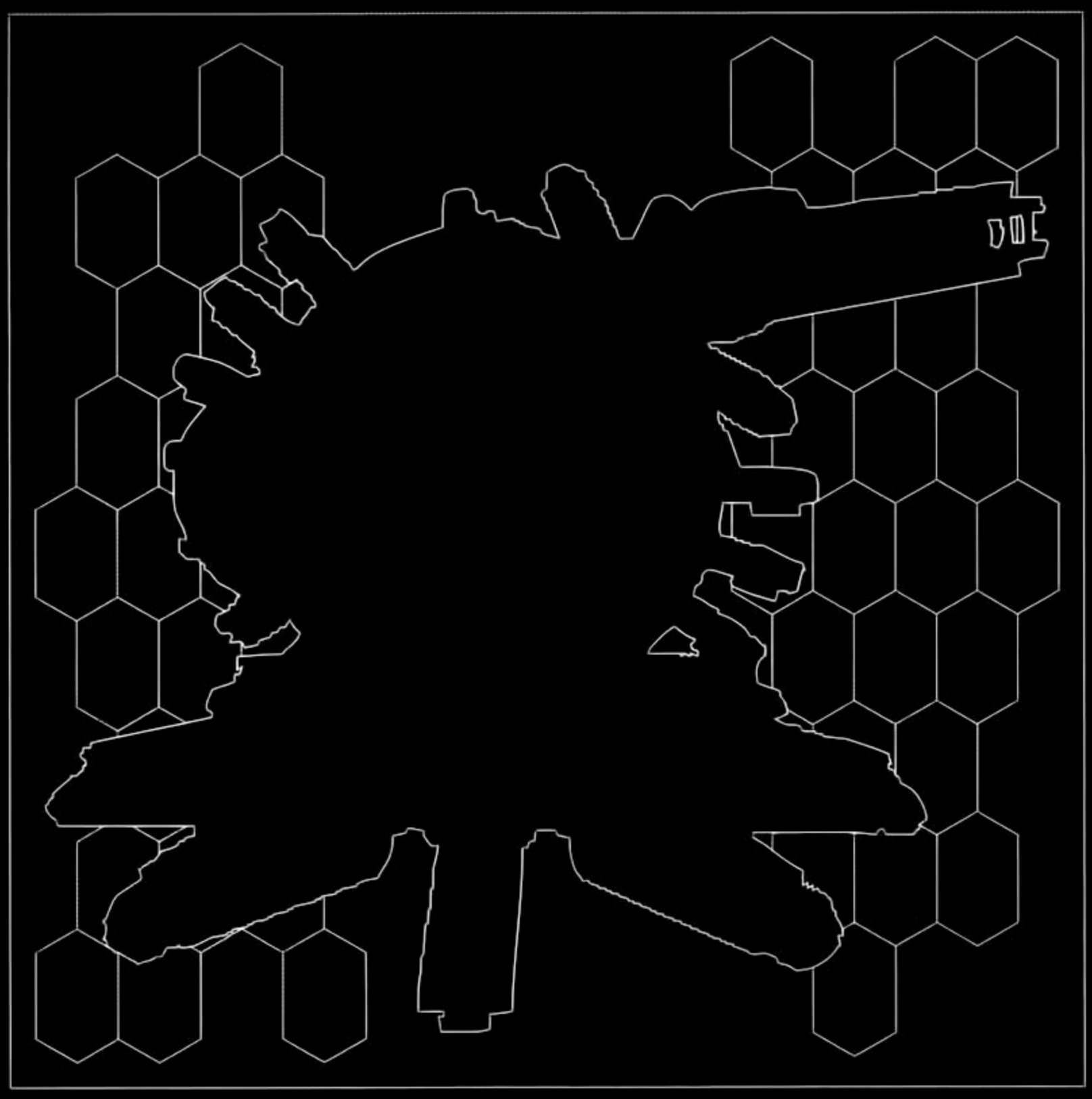
仕様… エアクッション+レーザー式推進システム

主砲… 主砲八本の収束レーザービーム

副砲… レーザービーム、レーザーパリー、ブラインド兵器など

コードネーム… ディープオプティカル（様々な光学技術の塊である事から）

メインカラーリング… アッシュブルー



DEEP OPTICAL

For a main cannon, the Deep Optical had a giant laser beam cannon on its upper right side. Also, eight thick cylinders were attached to the spherical main body with the base of the main cannon at the center as if they were the face of a clock. The energy produced by those eight cylinders was likely collected for the main cannon.

According to some footage the princess had seen during the pre-mission briefing, it had two giant parts attached to the back. They were thought to be cooling devices.

It also had countless lenses unnaturally positioned on the front of the spherical main body like some kind of crop circle. The Object gave an overall ominous impression.

"Do not falter. The enemy's main cannon is a laser beam! Its strength is attenuated with distance, but its speed remains the same. Approaching will only put you at a disadvantage!!"

"I know that!!"

After somehow managing to avoid the first shot, the princess forced the Baby Magnum on forward.

At the same time, she moved the main cannon arms.

The Baby Magnum could change what type of main cannon it used to match the situation. The backs of the barrels rotated like revolvers to choose laser beams just like the Deep Optical used.

The princess fired without hesitation.

The Deep Optical reacted immediately.

But its evasion speed was slow. It moved at only half the speed the Baby Magnum had. The princess saw no way it could avoid the laser beam like that. However...

"What...!?"

"..."

As everyone watched on, the laser beam the princess had fired suddenly changed trajectory. It headed off into the empty sky rather than to the Deep Optical.

"The heat produced by the laser altered the refractive index of the air!!" concluded the princess.

"Not good. Are they calculating it out using a super computer?"

The back of the seven barrels rotated once more as she chose the coilgun.

As she was directly firing a metal shell, the heat of the air would have minimal effects.

All seven main cannons fired in unison.

As before, the Deep Optical's evasion speed was low. It only moved far enough out of the way to protect half of its body.

However...

Bright white beams of light burst out.

"Again!? The Deep Optical altered the course of the shells just before they hit!"

"It must have focused its smaller laser beam cannons on them. By gouging holes in the side of the shells, air resistance would cause them to fly off course!!"

Simply put, it was a type of laser parry.

It was a stunt only possible with dozens of weapons that travelled at the speed of light.

The princess fired the coilguns several more times, but the laser parry was very accurate. Even at the close range of 1 or 2 kilometers, it proved difficult to do any damage with metal shells.

All the while, the enemy's tremendous laser beam cannons fired back at the princess.

As this intense battle progressed, the princess calmly continued to analyze the situation.

Suddenly, one of the giant coilgun shells deflected by the laser parry landed in the ocean right next to the Deep Optical.

(Does it not have accurate control over what direction they are deflected in?)

Just as an explosive splash of water threatened to flip the Deep Optical over, something strange happened.

The Object regained its balance with an unnatural movement. It was as if its center of gravity was located in the wrong place like with a self-righting doll.

"We detected high power lasers coming from the side of the spherical main body when it recovered its balance. It must have a system to explosively expand the air and use the momentum to forcefully right itself. It can likely right itself even when tipped as far as 70-80 degrees to the side."

With that in mind, the Deep Optical seemed to be a craft that was designed with a focus on stability.

It would stay in one place and fire its accurate and powerful laser beam cannons. Speed was sacrificed to ensure its main cannon would not malfunction. It seemed to be designed to have the upper hand when it came to the speed of its weapons rather than the speed of the entire Object's movements.

(If Quenser saw this, he would probably get excited.)

"That must mean the Deep Optical does not have much in the way of quick bursts of speed."

"Its top speed probably is not too bad, but it may only be able to reach those speeds via smooth acceleration. Laser technology can

be delicate. It may have to be careful in order to ensure that it does not destroy itself with the G forces created by its own movements."

That meant...

"I can defeat it by drawing in close and firing relentlessly!!" shouted the princess as she accelerated the Baby Magnum forward .

She knew the enemy could interfere with the laser beam and coilgun options for her main cannon, but the Baby Magnum still had one trump card left.

The low-stability plasma cannons.

She could avoid the Deep Optical's main cannon by monitoring the subtle actions made before firing. If she could fire her seven main cannons again and again while not getting hit herself, she could sink the Deep Optical.

Or so she thought.

(Huh?)

Doubt came to her mind.

The princess was taking evasive actions based on the subtle movements of the enemy's sensors, lenses, and cannons. With an enemy like the Deep Optical that used laser beam cannons, it was impossible to evade if the princess only detected it once the cannon had fired. To do that, she would have to overturn the theory of relativity.

But that was exactly why the princess found something odd.

She was evading the main cannon and the other laser beam cannons perfectly well. She was reading the subtle movements of the lenses and sensors just fine.

And yet...

The crop circle-like group of lenses on the front of the Deep Optical was not moving at all.

Unless they were simply malfunctioning or they were just a bluff, the enemy still had some kind of trump card remaining.

It was at that time that all of the lenses on the front of the Deep Optical moved at once.

(Here it comes!!)

The princess focused every nerve ending in her body.

By her estimation, it was likely a system to drastically raise the enemy's accuracy. For that reason, she concentrated more on taking evasive actions than on attack.

However, her estimation was incorrect.

No sound was made.

And yet the Deep Optical multiplied.

(What...?)

There were exactly ten of them.

When the princess saw the many Deep Opticals that suddenly appeared in a line, the princess's thoughts stopped for a moment.

(No, the Deep Optical has not multiplied.)

"Is it using 3D images!?"

A simple fake image would be meaningless. The Baby Magnum could use several methods to perform a lock, so she merely had to use her infrared sensors or her ultraviolet sensors to see which one was real.

However...

(The lock cursor is reacting to all 10 of them? I see. It is also manipulating infrared rays and ultraviolet rays to fool my computer!!)

In the next instant, the image blurred greatly.

Only one of the Deep Opticals was real.

The trick was especially insidious because they moved like the real one would and a virtual image was created to cover the location of the real Deep Optical as well.

The trick used high level 3D images and optical interference to confuse the other sensors as well. The princess determined the situation outside via her monitor, so this trick had the same effect on her as some mysterious ninja technique.

And...

(Oh, no. I can't just sit here!)

Even if she should have taken action sooner, the loss of data to base her decisions on put her at a serious disadvantage regardless.

The princess frantically moved straight to the side while ignoring the intense Gs this put on her body, but the Deep Optical's main cannon blast still struck one of the Baby Magnum's main cannon arms. The laser beam created from combining 8 main cannon-class laser beams blew away the Baby Magnum's main cannon arm like it was a sugar sculpture.

Part 6

"Damn. Is it using diffractive waves to create 3D images!? The principle is used in commercial 3D projectors, but they've altered the naked eye 3D image to work on an Object's lenses!! As it is creating diffractive wave image data to match the number of lenses used by the Object, you might be able to cause a flaw in the

image by cutting off a portion of your lenses, but they can simply detect which lenses are active from their subtle movements and immediately recreate the image accordingly!!"

Merely listening to the military radio frequency was enough to grasp the complexity and depth of the problem.

"My infrared and ultraviolet locks are being fooled as well!!"

"Use a radio lock! Do not rely on optical data!! Determine the truth using radar!"

"The radar is not functioning right either!! The number of blips is increasing!!"

"Dammit. In a broad sense, both light and radar are electromagnetic waves, so are they dealing with them all at once!? And your directional microphone and sonar will be obstructed by the wall of air that explosively expands whenever they fire their main cannon!!"

As he listened to the transmissions on a small boat stopped in the sea to the south of the operation area, Heivia naturally looked over toward where the Baby Magnum was fighting...and then he started to feel dizzy.

He brought his hand to the handrail and said, "Ugh...dammit. Does that really look like a realistic 3D image to her? From here, it looks like some twisted aura you would expect to have coming from Cthulhu."

"Just like the normal 3D images which are created using diffractive waves with an image for both the right eye and the left eye, the various images simply become chaos when not seen from the princess's vantage point. Also, that is not meant for the naked eye. It's creating images for all the many lenses on the Object, so it just looks like a mess to humans like us."

"The Information Alliance idol Elite I saw in Oceania was a hell of lot nicer than this."

"I kind of want to see a strip show displayed on this scale."

However, Quenser and Heivia had more important business to take care of.

They were part of the separate group that had changed out of their normal military uniforms and into black diving suits. The rest of the group was jumping out of the small boat and into the sea one after another.

They would dive down below the area in which the two Objects were fighting and pursue Oldnick.

"Dammit. I know bringing a large submarine this close would get noticed by the Deep Optical, but Oldnick's boat is over 20 kilometers from here. That isn't a distance flesh-and-blood humans should have to swim."

"Yeah, and there's nothing pretty about a bunch of filthy guys swimming through the ocean."

Quenser and Heivia had oxygen tanks on their backs and plastic fins on their feet. However, that was clearly not enough for them to reach Oldnick. For propulsion, they had aqua scooters. Simply put, they were something like kickboards with giant motors attached.

Supported by that electric power, the group of about ten including Quenser and Heivia travelled through the sea.

During peaceful times, that clear blue ocean water with tropical fish poking their heads out from the gaps in the coral would have been a wonderful sight to see, but they had no time to focus on such things.

Even with the electric propulsion, the long period of time spent underwater seemed to rob them of their sense of time.

They could not actually see their target and they had nothing but their compasses to tell them they were even headed in the right direction.

Also, this was no calm rest in a cradle. The clear risk of death was pressing against their backs the entire time. They felt a silence that seemed like it would drive them mad if it continued for too long.

All the while, giant shadows would occasionally pass over them and block out the light of the sun.

Needless to say, those were the Objects. As the Deep Optical used air cushions for its propulsion device and had no shark

anchors, it did little to disturb anything but the very surface of the water, but a sharp trembling still wrapped itself all around their bodies. The bombardments above the water also caused slight vibrations to spread throughout the ocean water.

And...

"Shit!! The princess has those naval battle floats and shark anchor attached, doesn't she!? She's agitating the water like crazy!! "

"Continue on! If we turn back, our fate will be no different from a plastic doll that gets swept into the drain!!"

Quenser and the others continued their desperate pursuit of Oldnick even as their ally seemed more likely to kill them than their enemy.

The Deep Optical could not capture humans under the water because it was a Second Generation Object specialized for fighting other Objects.

"I beg you. Don't fire any stray shots this way. If all the water around us suddenly boils, we'll have no way to escape."

"These vibrations in the water aren't going to destroy the oxygen tanks' valves or the aqua scooters' motors, are they?"

Suddenly, the Deep Optical fired its main cannon while moving above them at high speed.

Laser light could not actually be seen by the naked eye when viewed from the side. However, it roasted the dust and moisture in the air which was not something one wanted to look directly at.

For that reason, Quenser and the others kept their heads down and looked toward the depths of the ocean like someone in a swimming race.

And yet the brilliant white light stabbed into their eyes nevertheless.

"
Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh
!?"

Quenser let out a meaningless cry as he felt an intense pain as if his eyes and even his skull had been pierced.

He lost his sense of up and down.

It did not matter if he looked at it directly or not. Even the light that could find its way around was enough to rob a flesh-and-blood human of his senses.

"Quenser...Don't let go of your aqua scooter!! Focus on that feeling!!" shouted Heivia.

Quenser grabbed the aqua scooter tighter as if he was clinging to it and his numbed head finally began to feel gravity once more.

"Damn. We're only 100 meters away. That is way too close to a monster with that much laser technology."

"If you can see, help me with the others. Some unlucky idiots were looking straight up at the surface. They have their oxygen tanks, so they won't drown right away, but we still need to give them support."

At Heivia's urging, Quenser grabbed the arm of a middle-aged woman who had started to sink towards the bottom of the ocean. She must have been in pain because she was screaming, but Quenser had already shut off the personal channel on his radio. Listening to it would do no one any good.

And the Baby Magnum and Deep Optical's battle continued on above the surface

"I'd rather not have the side effects of their battle crush me any further. If we can just get away from them, the negative effects of the optical weapons will lessen. We need to get away from this area of sea as quickly as we can."

Quenser and the rest of the group somehow managed to escape the area of intense fighting as they trembled in fear.

However, they did not head up to the surface even then. They were not about to underestimate an Object's sensors. At the very least, they had to get far enough away that the enemy Object's focus on the princess would take precedence.

"Look, Heivia. Isn't that Oldnick's boat!"

"Tch. He's gotten pretty close to the sub!!"

The two decided they were far enough away and rose to the ocean surface.

They removed their goggles and took the oxygen hose out of their mouths, but the submarine's hatch had already been opened and a crew member had just stuck his head out. An old white man jumped down from an expensive-looking charter boat, but messed up his landing. However, he managed to climb up onto the submarine just as it looked like he would be swept away by the waves.

"The end is finally in sight!"

"Let's finish this with a hole in one."

But the distance was too great.

The submarine was about 1500 meters away.

"Damn, I can't shoot him with my rifle at this range!!"

"Heivia, what about an anti-tank missile!?"

"I thought it might come to that. A hole in one might be tough, but I can try for an albatross."

"Aren't albatrosses actually harder?"

"Yeah, but people get more excited about a hole in one."

As they spoke, Heivia pulled out a large tube that was inside a clear plastic bag that had been sealed with duct tape. He tore apart the packaging and threw it away. That sort of weapon was not too affected by a bit of water, but that could change if water got into the targeting computer or the path for the combustible gas. At the very least, it did not hurt to keep the water out.

Heivia rested the missile launcher tube on his shoulder as he treaded water.

"Shit! I can't aim right with these waves!! Quenser, hold me in place!!"

"No!! I don't want to embrace a guy in this blue sea!!"

"I don't want you to do it either!! But if that troublesome cardinal reaches the submarine's hatch, we'll be getting a bogey rather than an albatross! That'll just get us another lecture from our huge-breasted commander! If you don't want that, then help me!!"

Quenser seriously thought he would much rather have that beauty's boots digging into him, but the situation required some sacrifice. Since a position behind Heivia would get him blasted by the missile's blowback, he supported Heivia from the side.

"Here goes! Hold on tight to make sure I don't get knocked over !!"

"Just get it over with!! ...Oh, god. I need to find a way to invite the princess out swimming so I can blot out these memories."

With the roar of compressed air searching for a path out, the explosive shot towards the submarine.

The submarine was designed to withstand extreme water pressure, so something like that was not about to sink it.

However, they had made a mistake in opening the hatch to let Oldnick in.

When the crewmember saw the projectile, he frantically attempted to close the hatch, but the missile struck the wall just below the hatch before he could. A shockwave burst out along with an explosive roar, but the metal hatch survived the blast. However, the intense force pushed the hatch closed even though the crewmember still had his upper body leaning out of it.

Heivia winced slightly when he saw that human body being " eaten" through the sight. However, he did not have enough of a conscience to regret his actions.

"I got lucky!! I hit with the first shot! Heivia, the genius, beautiful, and rich noble, is just too amazing!! It looks like that bastard Oldnick was knocked off. He fell into the ocean."

"The sub is leaving."

"They must have decided it isn't worth sticking around. ...Damn that old man!! The lucky bastard is still moving!! Quit finding fault with Heivia, the genius, beautiful, and rich noble!!"

"I guess an albatross was too much to hope for. I hope we can at least make par."

Oldnick waved at the submarine in hopes that it would save him, but the black ship showed no sign of responding.

The cardinal continued waving for a bit, but he finally gave up. He then desperately moved his arms and legs to take him in a different direction.

"What now? Is he just swimming off in desperation?"

"No, isn't there a precious metal ocean mining plant financed by the Legitimacy Kingdom just north of here? It uses various filters to draw out and condense the tungsten dissolved in the ocean water."

"Not good... Not good! That place is like a bunker!! And if it gets caught up in the battle, that huge-breasted commander is going to completely erupt!!"

"Heivia, can you directly target that old man with a missile?"

"I can't reload in the ocean like this." Heivia reequipped his goggles and oxygen tank, and then grabbed his aqua scooter. "Life isn't always that easy. Our only option is to get close and shoot him with a normal bullet."

"I suppose this is still better than having the enemy Object head this way. Getting out of the bunker isn't going to be easy, but we may still be able to get an eagle."

Part 7

Froleytia gritted her teeth in her officer's room.

The higher ups had hoped to deal with Roybelz Oldnick in the same way they had fought Hyena, but things had ended up being completely different. She had no idea how the old man had arranged it, but now that the Capitalist Corporations' Deep Optical was involved, the problem had turned into a war.

On top of that, the Deep Optical had a special blinding weapon that interfered with their ability to take evasive actions.

It had created a number of clones of itself.

It created images using diffractive waves and used optical interference to disturb the various locking sensors.

Froleytia and the others back at the base constantly received information from the Object, so they understood what the princess was seeing.

Froleytia opened a line to the electronic simulation department as she tried to think up a countermeasure.

"Do you know how that blinding weapon works!?"

"It can freely emit 70 types of light waves at once and it can change the wavelengths as needed!! By simultaneously sending several wavelengths at one point in space, the normal light waves and the diffractive waves come together to create the image that is viewed as three dimensional. At the same time, it interferes with the infrared rays, ultraviolet rays, and every other optical device used to make a lock and the electromagnetic data from radar and the like!!" explained the operator from the electronic simulation department. "The angle of emission and distance are unknown! But with enough distance, the diffusion of the light waves would interfere with each other, so it should be within a few kilometers!!" The operator was practically yelling. "Also, a normal 3D image brings together footage for the right eye and the left eye, but this is using enough images for the number of lenses equipped on the Baby Magnum and is regulated by the diffractive rays. Intentionally cutting off a portion of the lenses should cause a disturbance in the image. That could be used to determine where the real one is, but..."

"They can immediately determine which lenses are active from their subtle movements and recreate the image to match, right?"

"The time until that happens is getting shorter! If the parameters of the 3D image continue to be changed liked this, even that slight ' out of place feeling' could disappear!!"

For the moment, the princess was not fooled at all. It was partially due to the fact that she would never believe that a single Object had suddenly become 10 Objects. The princess was seeing through the false footage and continuing the battle.

But...

"With 1% of doubt, you lose the ability to trust the remaining 99%," commented Froleytia.

"The false images are obviously false for the moment, but if a false image that is harder to tell apart from the real one is mixed in once she grows accustomed to these, the risk of the princess being caught off guard grows!!"

And the time spent with the false images continued to grow.

Being able to see through the false images was important, but looking at the false images for too long was a problem too.

"Right now, she is just barely managing to take action in advance because she knows her sensors are being interfered with, but if she does not make it in time, she will take a direct hit..."

The blinding weapon displayed its greatest effects within a range of a few kilometers. In that case, the princess could escape the threat by falling back further than that and beginning a bombardment from there.

But...

(No. The first shots from 10 kilometers were easily thrown off course. That 5 kilometer range is the best range for the princess to defeat the Deep Optical. Also, I doubt the Deep Optical would let her leave. If she tried to, it would do whatever it could to stop her.)

"What if we link the foot soldiers' cameras and the satellite to the Object to provide different points of view!?" suggested the operator.

"Those would have a slight lag and some noise. She wouldn't be able to keep up with the high speed of the battle while relying on those!!"

They had no options.

This was not an offensive cannon or defensive armor. The 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion's predicament was caused by something else entirely.

But then...

"...?"

Froleytia frowned.

The Deep Optical should have been drawing in and attacking repeatedly, but it was merely sitting in place and only occasionally firing. It was clearly overlooking an opportunity. In fact, it was actively moving backwards away from the princess whenever it had a chance.

Its actions seemed completely meaningless.

(What? Why would it abandon its advantage here and begin to retreat...?)

What was behind the Deep Optical?

What was to the north?

What lay beyond the battlefield?

Part 8

Even though it was funded by the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Solomon district had long been treated like a blank area due to the confusion over the tyrannical regime in the Oceanian military nation. In other words, it was not defended by a dedicated Object. An Object was deployed to the precious metal ocean mining plant in times of political unrest, but it did not have a unit stationed there for its defense.

That was where Roybelz Oldnick arrived at the end of his swim.

The plant itself was similar to a cultivation facility. The entire facility floated in the ocean. Over 80% of it was made up of 10 meter square frames. The frames were made of reinforced plastic and they floated from the multiple drums that were attached to them. The insides of the frames had hundreds of filters hanging into the ocean. Those filters would gather the tungsten dissolved into the seawater.

"Cough...cough!! Cough cough!!"

Oldnick had arrived at one of the frames at the very outside of the facility.

A man working in the plant hesitated over whether he should help him or report him, but he was unable to even let out a scream when Oldnick held a handgun out toward him.

"Do you have a helicopter here?" asked the old man with bloodshot eyes. "Or a motorboat. Anything will do. Do you have any kind of transportation!? I need to get away from here as quickly as possible. This is a blank area. If I can lose them here..."

Suddenly, a high-pitched gunshot cut off Oldnick's thoughts.

A bullet hole appeared in one of the drums keeping a nearby frame afloat.

From 500 meters away in the ocean, Quenser shouted, "You suck at this, Heivia!!"

"I can't brace myself or aim properly when treading water in these waves, dammit!!"

Their target seemed to have resolved himself to shooting the worker who could get in his way.

Quenser pulled some Hand Axe plastic explosive out of the bag on his back and shouted as loud as he could.

"Jump in!!"

The worker immediately dove headfirst into the middle of one of the frames, but Oldnick moved to fire a bullet after him into the ocean water regardless.

After stabbing an electric fuse into it, Quenser chucked the Hand Axe toward the old man.

As Heivia had said, he could not brace himself while treading water. He had tried to throw it in a long arc, but the explosive did not even make it 50 meters.

He hit the switch on his radio regardless.

A loud explosive noise rang out and Oldnick got down on the ground despite being well out of range of the blast.

However, it had been meant as a psychological attack in the first place.

Oldnick did not seem like the type of person who was used to running through the battlefield. He had no idea what the range of danger from an explosion was, so he seemed to have frantically chosen retreat from just the slight pain on his skin and ears from the shockwave.

He looked over at the two boys and fired an occasional shot from his handgun (knowing he could not hit from that range) as he jumped from frame to frame. As there was no cover to be found in that area, he felt the need to make some preparations before a real firefight occurred.

While 80% of the plant was made up by those frames, the remaining 20% was different.

"When we climb up onto land will be the most dangerous part. Even if he just has a handgun, we're goners if he targets us while we're defenseless."

"We have our oxygen tanks and aqua scooters. Let's dive down and use the ocean water as a shield."

Quenser and Heivia moved stealthily through the water. The outside of the square frames was made up of thin pieces of cloth one meter wide and a few dozen meters long. With all the frames lined up in a grid, those cloths stretching down looked something like rectangular pillars. They stretched straight down despite the slight rocking of the waves, so they must have had some kind of weight attached to the bottom.

"(Amazing. Is that stuff glittering like aluminum foil all tungsten? It looks like you could make all the construction equipment for a mid-sized automobile factory with just one of those filters.)"

"(Heh. It's almost as dazzling as my sexy face)" commented Heivia.

"(Man, I kind of want to take a souvenir home with me.)"

Meanwhile, Oldnick ran down a pathway on the exterior of the frames and entered a facility made of steel. Even that facility was built atop the type of large float that was commonly used for floating airports.

(My odds are not good in a straight fight.)

The former cardinal came to that conclusion.

After all, he was up against a professional military unit with the backing of a world power. They had better equipment and more ammunition. A soaking wet old man with a single handgun could hardly hope to oppose them.

He had also been abandoned by the submarine.

As a cardinal, he was supposed to be a symbol of the holy and just, so something was wrong from the moment he had to stretch out his arms in a desperate attempt to grasp any means of escape.

(I have always been right. I have always been on the right side.)

And yet he had shaken hands with Hyena, a group that had no problem with attacking civilian convoys and facilities that distributed cargo.

(If nothing was done about the expansion of the Greek power, the Christian Church would have lost its land, funding, people, and culture, one after another. I stood up to protect those things.)

To escape Valkyrie, he had shouted to the Capitalist Corporations that the Legitimacy Kingdom was Valkyrie's ally and had brought about a real war in the sea to the south.

(My actions will shine brilliantly within the history of the Faith Organization! Everyone will sing my praises and revere my name! That is how it should be. Anything else would be nonsense! Yes,

utter nonsense! It would be unjust! No one is looking at this properly!!)

However, Oldnick had been abandoned by his allies' submarine , he had aimed his gun at a civilian worker of that plant, and had fled through the sea to save his own skin.

But the old man did everything he could to avert his gaze from that pathetic reality.

His hopes had not yet been completely destroyed.

He still had a trump card. So long as he had that, the Capitalist Corporations' Object was on his side.

Oldnick arrived at a piece of equipment that was likely used to help with air traffic control for helicopters. He set the frequency on the large radio to contact the Capitalist Corporations military.

Of course, he was using a civilian piece of equipment that could not encrypt the signal, so Quenser and Heivia could easily intercept it.

The two boys recognized the voice that came in response.

A bit of age could be heard in the voice, but it maintained a core of discipline.

It belonged to the commander they had run into in the Loyauté district.

"Cardinal Oldnick. Do not use that device. Our transmissions must be properly encrypted. We gave you a radio to contact us with."

"If I could use that, why would I be using this roundabout method!?"

Quenser and Heivia had already arrived at the bottom of the plant. They were now searching for a point they could safely surface and climb out of the water at.

"Send the Object this way as soon as possible!! I thought you were going to cut off the path of any Legitimacy Kingdom pursuers! How did these ones get through? Also..."

"You want to know why that plant you are in has yet to be destroyed, cardinal? Not all operations go precisely as planned. We are currently working to fulfill our quota."

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance while underwater.

That comment had made it sound like the destruction of the plant had been part of the plan all along.

"Listen." While too worried to even think about the possibility of his soaking wet state putting him in danger of electrocution, Roybelz Oldnick shouted into the radio microphone with an almost hysteric tone to his voice. "If I die here, you cannot acquire what you are after. Do not forget that!"

"And don't you forget that just knowing the method does not allow you to produce it. Keep in mind that no one will give you better terms than us."

After deciding on a point to surface, Heivia removed the scope from his rifle and poked it out of the water like a periscope in order to check for any guards.

While listening to the radio, Quenser muttered, "Platinum."

"What do you mean?"

"Oldnick first came into contact with Hyena. They were stealing the Oceanian made platinum. And now he's targeting a plant used to acquire tungsten. I can only think of one reason." Quenser seemed to hesitate before continuing. "I've heard of a project that is attempting to create platinum atoms by artificially combining carbon and tungsten atoms. It's called the Treasure of Electron Mathematics. It's a technique in which an atom with an unstable number of electrons is stabilized by combining it with another atom. The old lady said research was being taken into mass producing industrial platinum, so I searched the military database for information on it."

Basically, it was the technology to create incredibly valuable platinum out of 2 completely different types of atoms.

"Tungsten is classified as a rare earth, but it still isn't as valuable as platinum."

"While they are creating as much synthetic platinum as they want, they also want to drive up its value by obstructing any other means of producing it. The destruction of the tungsten plant is likely a means of keeping others from using the same method as themselves."

While sending out his transmission from the control equipment, Oldnick started audibly grinding his teeth. He then reached out for the last thin life line remaining for him.

It was a connection made out of nothing but money.

The old man knew how risky that was.

However, no card was more effective in dealings with the Capitalist Corporations military.

"Once the system for producing platinum is in place, I will once more be able to stand on the center stage. A single Object costs more than 5 billion dollars, but that means one can start a war after gathering that much money. I will recover my territory from the hands of that Greek power."

"Do you wish for a comeback that much? I thought the church council had yet to come to a definitive decision over whether this method of production was in violation of divine providence or not. I thought there was a danger that this constitutes bringing impurities into the world created by god."

Most religions believed that god had either created the world or was largely involved in its origin and therefore all materials would have been unable to exist without having been created by god.

In that case, was it acceptable for humans to create materials that did not exist in the natural world?

Would that not be nothing more than bringing unnecessary impurities into the world god had created?

Many had whispered of that problem, but the central authority of the Faith Organization had not spoken out against the creation of things like plastics.

Creating water from oxygen and hydrogen was nothing more than rearranging a portion of the world god had created. The central authority felt that was nothing more than an extension of the world god had created and it therefore did not violate providence.

"But that reasoning does not apply for the Treasure of Electron Mathematics. Instead of combining atoms to create a molecule, the number of electrons between atoms is manipulated to create a different atom when two atoms are combined. That is different from simply using the atoms as building blocks."

And that was not the only problem.

The created atom was not some brand new material. The fact that already existing platinum was being created was key.

"Even though this material is created by combining a tungsten atom with a carbon atom, it is exactly the same as a natural platinum atom. This foreign atom is completely indistinguishable from the real deal. Not only is an artificial substance being brought into the world created by god, but this artificial substance fits right in without any problems whatsoever. That may have caused the church to oppose this much more strongly than simply creating some toxic new substance."

This was different from artificially recreating a natural environment to create an artificial diamond out of carbon.

This was a case of taking two non-platinum atoms and creating a single platinum atom.

It was not merely creating a different form of platinum that was seen as blasphemous.

It was the exposure of the vulnerability of the universal system of atoms and molecules that was seen as blasphemous.

However, Oldnick responded immediately.

The instantaneous response made it seem like he was only focusing on what was convenient to him rather than speaking from a deeply-held conviction.

"I will reclaim the land, assets, and people those savages stole. There is no valid reason to criticize me for that."

"Even if you have the money, there are many other barriers to producing an Object."

"It does not matter if I do not reach my goal of an Object in the end. Did you know that the Faith Organization's exchange rate has been fixed? In order to deal with the exchange rate of the world market, transactions using diamonds and platinum are growing more common than those using our own currency."

"Yes, but economic analysts have called that a roundabout method of dealing with it."

"Greek's primary exchange rate is tied to platinum. If its value crashes, their culture will fall into chaos. My true desire would be to personally send an Object in, but it does not necessarily have to be me who fills that role." Roybelz Oldnick gave a cunning smile. " They expanded their influence through rather forceful methods. That has earned them a lot of hatred. Once their momentum has been slowed with the chaos over platinum values, others will tear into them."

Quenser and Heivia approached the facility through the sea in that old man's blind spot.

They double checked the point and then grabbed onto the edge of the giant float, but then a high-pitched gunshot rang out.

The edge of the float burst open slightly.

The two boys frantically let go and hid in the ocean once more.

"What the hell was that!? That wasn't Oldnick! It came from the wrong direction!!"

They could not see far through the moving ocean surface. However, sticking their heads above the surface would bring the risk of being shot.

A bullet ripped apart the ocean surface and shot by Quenser and Heivia while accompanied by something like a spear made up of air bubbles.

"It looks like they don't know exactly where we are." Quenser and Heivia swam away from that spot while thinking about what to do. "Have some comrades of Oldnick's arrived?"

"Or have some guards from the Capitalist Corporations been sent out here?"

Heivia floated up near the surface and poked just the scope of his rifle out of the seawater.

Using it like a periscope, he checked around the area.

"Not good. I don't think those are Capitalist Corporations soldiers."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Valkyrie. Some of those Faith Organization elites are clinging to one of the plant's frames!!"

Quenser moved up next to Heivia and took the scope from him.

He checked for himself.

Sure enough, some women wearing familiar uniforms were there. Valkyrie was not running along on top of the frame. They were aiming their short-range sniper rifles with their elbows pressed against the frame for stability.

"It seems they're as aware as us that there is really nowhere to hide."

A small submarine could be seen sticking up above the water a bit away from them.

Quenser handed the scope back to Heivia.

"But why is Valkyrie here? Since they're from the Faith Organization too, is it related to Oldnick!?'

"If so, this could be even worse than running across some Capitalist Corporations' soldiers. But at the same time..."

Heivia trailed as more gunfire rang out.

The two boys hunkered down, but the bullets were not headed in their direction.

"What? Are they targeting our other comrades?"

"No, they aren't... They're firing at the giant float Oldnick ran onto!!"

"Why!?"

"That's their standard job. Valkyrie is a global divine punishment group that executes any 'enemies of god' who have violated religious rules. They're targeting Oldnick as members of the Faith Organization!!" Heivia reattached the scope to his rifle and then checked to make sure it was working right. "But we can't assume the enemy of our enemy is our friend. Valkyrie is after the same target as us. At this rate, we can't avoid a conflict!!"

They were targeting the same person, but any argument between them could provide Roybelz Oldnick with a chance to escape. And any extra time spent gave Capitalist Corporations' troops more time to arrive to defend him.

"..." Quenser thought for a bit. "Heivia, hand me your rifle."

"What? You've never had any marksmanship training. How the hell are you going to be of any use here!? Do you think they can't hit us at this distance because they have short-range sniper rifles? With their skill, they can hit us easily!!"

"No, not that." Quenser shook his head. "I know a more effective method than bullets."

When he told Heivia what that method was, Heivia expressed his disapproval just as Quenser had expected he would.

"That's crazy. I already told you, the enemy of our enemy is not our friend! We're after the same target, so..."

"Just leave it to me." Quenser knew it would make the contents unusable, but he opened his survival kit underwater. "As with everything, it depends on *how* you do it. So just hand me your rifle, Heivia."

Part 9

Valkyrie member Sarasa Gleamshifter clicked her tongue while clinging to a tungsten plant and commanding a small number of subordinates.

(I never expected to run into the Legitimacy Kingdom at this stage.)

Roybelz Oldnick's reckless comments were the same as ever, but she got the feeling he had intentionally gotten the Legitimacy Kingdom involved in order to help him escape Valkyrie.

He had intentionally disrupted the flow towards checkmate by causing a conflict between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization so that he could complete his escape to somewhere safe.

Normally, making a direct enemy of an Object was suicidal, but he could just barely get away with it by having the Capitalist Corporations eliminate it for him.

(We were deployed because those impudent ideas of his reached a level where they violated our religious rules. But our reasoning means nothing to the Legitimacy Kingdom. We cannot avoid a conflict here.)

"Maria, Rachel." Sarasa gave instructions to her subordinates over the radio. "We must finish them off quickly. Prepare your 50 mm mortar. I will intentionally fire well off target. Once they know we are using short-range sniper rifles, they will assume we cannot hit them at this range and grow negligent. Fire at them once their heads surface."

"Understood. We can hold the mortar one-handed, so the setup takes no time at all."

"If we don't take care of this quickly and get out of here, we might even end up with that Object pursuing us."

After seeing Maria and Rachel dive under the water, Sarasa peered through her scope once more.

She then noticed something strange sticking up from the ocean surface

It was the standard issue assault rifle of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

She would have understood if just the barrel was sticking out, but for some reason, it was sticking out with the portion of the stock that pressed against the shoulder up. Also, some kind of white cloth was tied to the stock. She had no way of knowing, but the cloth came from a survival kit. The cloth could be used as a bandage for a wound, as a sling for a broken arm, or to hold a sprained ankle in place.

(Is that supposed to be a white flag?)

Sarasa frowned as she could not determine what they were trying to do.

When she looked at the rifle sticking up out of the water once more, she noticed something written in permanent marker on the white cloth.

It was a number several digits long.

She thought for a second and then pulled out her radio.

"What is the meaning of this? Are you trying to determine my location from the signal?"

"Thank goodness you have plenty of curiosity."

When she set the frequency, she heard a voice that clearly did not belong to anyone in her unit. For one thing, it was male.

The voice likely belonged to a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier.

"We are also targeting Roybelz Oldnick. However, only one of us can kill him. That issue could start an unnecessary firefight that will just give Oldnick a chance to escape. ...Am I right in assuming you see this the same way?"

"It seems you are not an idiot." Sarasa gave a thin smile. "I assume you are not thinking the enemy of your enemy is your friend. Valkyrie will eliminate any enemies of god no matter what. We have no intention of giving you his head. I do not like that he set this up, but we cannot avoid a conflict over this."

"You can have his head," replied the Legitimacy Kingdom soldier immediately. "We just need to get DNA evidence. After Oldnick is dead, we'll give you some time. You can chop off his head, but leave the rest of him for us. We'll retrieve that."

"..."

Sarasa thought for a bit.

"I will deem that an official proclamation. If you do anything that works against our interests, we will officially register you and your unit as enemies of god. It does not matter if it is intentional. If a single stray bullet hits me or my subordinates, the Faith Organization will pursue you for all eternity."

"That's fine." Whether he truly understood what it meant to make a promise with Valkyrie or not, the Legitimacy Kingdom soldier did not hesitate. "Our orders were simply to confirm that Oldnick is dead. Unlike you, it does not matter to us who kills him. Also, I'm not about to fall into our enemy's trap and get into a pointless firefight during this age of clean battlefields. The fewer corpses in the end, the better."

Part 10

Valkyrie of the Faith Organization aimed toward the giant float and fired their short-range sniper rifles again and again. They did not use full auto, but this was not in order to raise their accuracy. They wanted to be constantly firing, and so they wanted to lower their rate of ammunition consumption.

As could be seen by the fact that they were not particularly concerned with accuracy, Valkyrie were not trying to hit their distant target.

They were providing cover fire for Quenser and Heivia as they climbed out of the water and onto the giant float.

They were ensuring that Oldnick would not shoot the two boys during that dangerous period by preventing him from coming out from behind cover.

"Shit!! They're firing pretty intensely!! Are you sure this is cover fire? They're not actually using this as a chance to kill us, are they!? "

"They can't aim too accurately at this distance with those short-range sniper rifles. Of course, that isn't exactly reassuring even if they aren't intentionally targeting us."

Quenser and Heivia climbed aboard the giant floating plant and headed for the control equipment while keeping low to the ground . Quenser pulled out a clay-like bomb, attached it to the center of the metal door leading into the facility, and stabbed in an electric fuse.

That was when Oldnick noticed them.

He aimed his handgun at the door and fired several times.

Quenser and Heivia frantically leapt out of the way.

"Shit! Let's get away from the door, Quenser!! That way you can blow it out of our way!!"

"I hope this kills him!!"

While remaining down on the ground, Quenser hit the switch on his radio.

With an explosion, the steel door was blown off its hinges and into the room. It did not hit Oldnick directly, but the shockwave seemed to have hit him. They saw him thrown forcefully against the communications equipment inside.

Heivia fired his rifle into the now-doorless entrance and sparks flew from several devices within. But Oldnick moved his unsteady legs and ran towards the staircase further within the facility.

"That persistent bastard!!" shouted Heivia as he ran for the stairs after Oldnick.

Repeated gunshots rang out.

They did not come from Heivia's rifle; they came from Oldnick's handgun.

When Heivia arrived on the 2nd floor, he leaned up against a corner in the passageway. Oldnick was periodically firing his handgun, so Heivia could not carelessly poke his head around the corner. When he did take a peek around the corner despite the danger, he saw that the old man had knocked over all the furniture along the wall of the passageway to create a simple barricade.

"What a pain in the ass." Heivia brought his radio's microphone to his mouth. "Quenser. Hey, Quenser!! Give me one of your electric fuses! Toss one up to me right away!!"

"Why? And what about the explosive?"

"Just toss it up the staircase!!" shouted Heivia.

Quenser did as he was told and tossed the pen-like fuse from the bottom of the staircase. Heivia crouched down to pick the fuse up from the ground, and pulled out the spare round for his handheld anti-tank missile launcher. He then stuck the end of the electric fuse into the connector on the side.

He could now detonate it remotely.

"Just fucking die already!!"

While drawing back from Oldnick's gunfire, Heivia stuck just his arm around the corner of the passageway and threw the explosive.

Heivia immediately pressed his back against the wall and used his thumb to flip the panel off the switch on his radio.

He could detonate it at any time.

Even if Oldnick survived, the barricade between the two would have been blown away. Heivia could easily finish off the enemy while his movements were dulled by the shock.

Just as Heivia was about the hit the switch...

"Wait! Wait!!"

The old man's voice suddenly came from down the passageway .

Heivia could not peer around the corner. He preferred not to be shot between the eyes.

"I can give you information on the Capitalist Corporations Object!!" said Oldnick. "You aren't from Valkyrie, are you!? You must be from the Legitimacy Kingdom then. You need information on the Capitalist Corporations Object you are fighting, right!?"

"Planning another slip of the tongue, are you? Sorry, but our primary target is you, not the Deep Optical. You really need to learn how to keep your mouth shut. Also, without you, the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations have no reason to continue fighting."

"This time, maybe. But you will meet again on the battlefield someday. Wouldn't it be better to learn how that Second Generation Object works now?"

(Tch. He knows where we stand. Has he gotten some information on us from somewhere?)

"Also, the information could be used in developing your own Objects. It uses a liquid prism to safely combine multiple laser beams and it uses laser vibration detection to help absorb any shocks. Information on those technologies could help make them exclusive to the Legitimacy Kingdom."

It was true that information on Object technology could earn someone massive amounts of money. A hopeful designer like Quenser might even drool at the thought.

Oldnick continued speaking as Heivia remained silent.

"Stay your hand here. I will wait here for things to calm down. I do not wish to make an enemy of the Legitimacy Kingdom. All I care about is destroying Greece. And if that means I must oppose the entirety of the Faith Organization, it could work to your advantage."

"...I see."

Not only would he hand over information on some Object technology, but he would also destroy a major power within the Faith Organization.

After thinking on it, Heivia came to his conclusion.

"Then I think you need to die."

"Shit!?"

Just before Heivia unhesitatingly pressed the button on his radio, Oldnick leaped to the side in an attempt to get as far away as possible from the explosive. When he landed, he slid across the ground like a baseball player sliding headfirst into base.

With an explosive noise, dust was blown into the air.

"Gaaaahhh!?"

"Tch. So he can still scream!!"

The type of explosive and distance from the explosive were also important factors, but Heivia had seen a report saying the deadliness of an explosive blast differed by over 70% depending on whether the target was standing or lying down.

Oldnick tried to pull up his hurting body, but it would not move the way he wanted it to. The old man could only breathe heavily as he lay on the ground.

"You...idiot. Do you not know a good deal when you see one!?" said the old man.

"It's true that nothing could be better for us than for the Faith Organization to weaken itself with internal conflicts." Heivia carefully walked out from behind the corner and kept his rifle aimed at the old man. "But you aren't distinguishing between the battlefield and the safe countries when you say you are going to destroy this Greek power. I have no intention of helping someone like that."

"...!?"

Meanwhile, Quenser remained in the room filled with large communications equipment on the first floor of the facility.

(Dammit, Oldnick. I know you don't want to die, but where do you think your goal is here?)

Quenser searched for a map of the facility to see if there was a heliport on the rooftop.

A handheld device sat atop the control panel. The plastic exterior was cracked, but the display was still lit.

(Is this Oldnick's?)

Quenser picked it up.

(It might have some information on him. If we know the scope of his power and what exactly he is after, we can figure out what to do next!!)

He found external links and collections of encryption codes, but the device's wireless functionality was broken, so he could not access any information stored on external servers. However, he did find a few temporary files still on the device. Quenser worked for a bit and finally found a way to read those temporary files.

Changes in the Value of Platinum

How to Use Tungsten

The Treasure of Electron Mathematics

He found a few fragmentary titles, but he could not access the full documents they linked to. Quenser clicked his tongue and called up more information.

Oceania

Domed Livestock Facilities = Information Alliance Made

The Food Supply Situation

Self-Sufficiency and Importation

"What...?"

Quenser frowned.

He found some data on Oceanian agriculture. Yet he had thought the Capitalist Corporations and Oldnick's connection was based on the Treasure of Electron Mathematics that created manmade platinum using tungsten. He saw no connection to agriculture or the food supply.

(No, wait...)

The Unstable Balance of Oceania's Natural Environment

The Impossibility of Future Dairy Farming Based on Grazing Land

70% of Meat Imported from the Capitalist Corporations

The Effect of Manmade Livestock Facilities Supplied by the Information Alliance

Quenser audibly gulped.

"Due to the unstable balance between vegetation and desert in Oceania, grazing land was banned. This meant they had to rely on imported meat which mostly came from the Capitalist Corporations. But Oceania plans to use the funds from the platinum mined there to purchase dome-shaped livestock facilities from the Information Alliance. That means..."

A certain world power did not want Oceania to use artificial livestock facilities.

They wanted to drive down the value of the source of funds for those large-scale dairy farming facilities.

To do that, they had to destroy the value of platinum.

It was in the Capitalist Corporations' interests to cause a crash in the value of platinum using the Treasure of Electron Mathematics.

However...

The Information Alliance-made livestock facilities were needed to improve the unstable food supply situation.

Robbing them of that option meant...

The Negative Effects of Cyclones

Worries Over the Possibility of Import Routes Becoming Blocked

Severe Food Shortages

Estimated Starvation Levels of Over Half a Million

Up to 750,000 Could Die Before a Solution is Found

"Those monsters!!!!!"

Just as Quenser very nearly crushed the handheld device in his grip, a staticky voice came in over the large communication equipment that had been partially damaged in the firefight.

"Oh, right." The speaker must have thought he was still speaking with Oldnick. "Cardinal, there is one last thing I would like to make clear. It is about the method of creating manmade platinum you call the Treasure of Electron Mathematics. The truth is, we do not really need it."

"..."

"Basically, we just need the price of Oceanian platinum to plummet. The thing about the market is, an expected crash is enough to cause a panic even if there was never any real threat."

Quenser knew what the man was trying to say.

His face paled as the man continued to speak.

"And so we do not actually need to learn the details of the method from you, cardinal. We just need it to be known that we worked with you in some way or another. In fact, if you are captured or killed by the Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith

Organization here, some might decide you never actually managed to give us information on the Treasure of Electron Mathematics. That would be a problem."

"Heivia!!" Quenser brought his own small radio to his mouth. " Get out of here now! Now that Oldnick is cornered here, the Capitalist Corporations is going to-...!!"

"In that case, wouldn't the best way to keep those useful doubts alive be to turn you to ash there?" continued the man.

Quenser had no time to wait for Heivia's response.

He ran out of the facility as quickly as he could and leaped into the sea. Seawater got in his mouth, but he did not care. He covered his eyes with his right arm.

In the next instant, a great flash of light exploded out. It seemed like the light of welding multiplied several dozen times.

Even with his arm covering them, the light stabbed into his eyes . He could not even calmly deduce that the light came from a massive laser beam burning the structure away.

In all seriousness, Quenser went blind for a bit.

That violently bright light was the proof that it was an attack from a ridiculously huge weapon.

It was a Second Generation Object.

It was the Deep Optical.

(Uuh...!?)

"Cough!! Cough cough!!"

His vision started to come back, but an afterimage remained as if a film was being draped over his eyes.

Quenser started to panic. He completely forgot about the tube right next to his mouth leading to the oxygen tank on his back and headed for the ocean surface for air.

When his face breached the surface, the change to the environment became abundantly clear.

The giant, lightly-colored float had been polished like a silver mirror.

Except that was not what had happened.

(A portion of the steel facility was vaporized!?)

The metal had turned into a hot vapor, had been sprayed across the giant float, and then had cooled and hardened there. That made the surface of the float shine like it had been silver-plated.

(God dammit...)

As always, Object cannons were in a league of their own.

Quenser knew he had escaped the blast, but fear still filled him from the tips of his fingers and toes to the very core of his body

upon seeing those effects. He could not feel any relief over having avoided it. He had to use his intellect to its fullest in order to come up with a plan to survive, but he could feel his thoughts falling to pieces in the face of his emotions.

That was when the upper floors of the facility fell to the ocean because the middle floors had been destroyed.

The sudden waves this caused tossed Quenser around, but he managed to not drown thanks to his oxygen tank.

When he surfaced once more, he spotted Heivia's head sticking out of the water nearby.

He had likely jumped out a window just before the laser beam struck.

"I almost died! Dammit, I almost died!! I can't think straight and I can't feel pain properly!! I still have all my arms and legs, right!?"

It seemed Heivia had begun to panic.

Quenser then heard a female voice come in over his radio.

It was from Valkyrie.

"Hey, we saw what just happened! What happened to Roybelz Oldnick!?"

The reply came from Heivia who had been pursuing the man up to the very last second.

"How the fuck should I know!? That old man was acting like he had all the answers while talking about liquid prisms and laser vibration detectors, but he sure got blown away with the entire 2nd floor easily enough!! I doubt there's enough left of him to feed a single fish!!"

"Tch!!"

Quenser heard someone click their tongue and then the radio transmission cut off.

Quenser tried contacting them again a few times, but he received no response.

"I think they ran off..."

"I want to join them!! Our huge-breasted commander told us not to let anything happen to the plant, and look what happened!! How many yellow cards is that now!? Can you even stock up red cards!?"

Quenser ignored Heivia and muttered to himself to gather his thoughts.

"Valkyrie was after nothing but Oldnick from the start. They have no reason to stick around to help with the Capitalist Corporations or Deep Optical."

But Quenser and Heivia were not so lucky.

The Deep Optical was fighting with the Baby Magnum. If the princess lost that battle, Quenser and Heivia at the very least

would be persistently pursued if not the entire mobile maintenance battalion.

After all, they had given the Deep Optical enough of a reason to focus its fire on them with what they had done in the Loyauté district.

They had no idea when the Object's main cannon would be fired at them in the name of destroying the plant to drive up the price of tungsten.

"As always, we have to charge through the heart of hell in order to survive."

"Oh, what the hell! Why is it always an Object in the end!? We're getting a little too close to actually ending up in heaven here !"

While cursing their luck, the two boys reequipped their goggles and the mouth pieces for their oxygen tanks, and then dove down once more.

They were headed for the Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Object.

They would not leave alive unless the Deep Optical was destroyed.

Part 11

As Quenser and Heivia headed through the ocean with their aqua scooters, the bombardment from the Deep Optical continued. Naturally, the bombardment was targeting the tungsten plant.

"Shit!! Our huge-breasted commander just won't stop yelling! We didn't manage to retrieve Oldnick's body and now the plant is being attacked. This is getting worse and worse!"

"If I have to choose between becoming fish food and being treaded on by a beautiful woman, I will always choose the latter! So let's focus on surviving this, Heivia!!"

The Deep Optical was unsuited to high-speed movements, so its strategies focused around deciding things quickly with its giant laser. However, it was now attacking the plant while holding the princess's Baby Magnum off almost casually.

It was clear which Object had the upper hand.

The Baby Magnum had not been directly hit by the enemy's main cannon, but it continued to just barely avoid it. The side effects of the giant laser had to be doing damage bit by bit. That Deep Optical seemed to have nothing to worry about.

But...

"How odd. They're only targeting the giant float with that facility on it while completely ignoring the frames that make up the majority of the plant."

"They just want to make the entire plant unusable. Afterwards, they can retrieve the filters and take the tungsten for themselves. It's a very Capitalist Corporations way of thinking."

The one piece of luck was that this strategy kept the rest of the group meant to pursue Oldnick from being targets as they helped the civilian workers evacuate via ship.

However, they could hardly relax.

"Either way, only one fate awaits us if the princess loses. The rest of the unit might survive, but we have given them enough reason to hunt us down."

Quenser was of course referring to the incident in the Loyauté district.

Sounding annoyed, Heivia said, "I know we have to do it, but how are we supposed to oppose that monster?"

"It's specialized for naval battles, so it uses an air cushion propulsion device. Its armaments are centered around laser beams. That gives us a few starting points." Quenser let his body float in place thanks to the buoyancy provided by the program-controlled oxygen regulation inside his diving suit. "The air cushion propulsion device keeps the craft afloat using the power of air, so the situation between the floats and the ocean surface can greatly affect its balance"

"Yeah, it remains stable by keeping the air between two large flat surfaces."

"And it loses its balance if that is destroyed," said Quenser. " Luckily, this is the ocean rather than solid ground. That gives us a chance. We need to take a large chunk of the ocean water out from under the Deep Optical. If we do, it will capsize and sink. ...A few years back, a Second Generation Object specialized for naval battles was sunk by a freak wave."

"But we can't just cause a freak wave," said Heivia in disapproval. "Freak waves are large enough to sink tankers and they occur unexpectedly. The exact conditions that cause them are unknown. It's true that they're like the grim reaper to ships on the sea, but how are we supposed to cause one when no one knows what exactly causes them?"

"That was just an example. Also, the Deep Optical has laser beam emitters on its side that it can use to detonate the air and recover like a self-righting doll."

"What other 'starting points' do you have?"

"That high power laser beam. Its main cannon indirectly helped us out in the Loyauté district. It gathers the energy of 8 laser beams and fires it all at once. If something goes wrong with the control of that energy, it might blow itself apart."

"What, are you going to climb up onto that main cannon?" Heivia shrugged within the seawater. "Even if it's a relatively slow

Object, it still moves at over 200 kph. If we tried to grab onto it, it would rip our arms off."

"Can we interfere with it from a distance?"

"There's no way we can get a hole-in-one firing an anti-tank missile down the barrel of the main cannon."

"What about interference with its programming?"

"If that was possible, the electronic simulation department would have tons of medals."

Quenser fell silent.

Heivia had plenty of negative opinions, but he was good at viewing the situation rationally (when it meant saving his own skin). Quenser had plenty of positive opinions, but he was bad at seeing the risk when he thought he had a way of winning.

Quenser was thankful for those characteristics of his comrade in arms. Your personality was not something you could change even if you were aware of its negative aspects.

Quenser suddenly stopped his thought process and spoke once more.

"Then there is one last thing we can rely on."

"Ahn?"

"Just to double check, Oldnick mentioned a liquid prism and laser vibration detectors before he died, right?"

"Yeah, he made it sound like the liquid prism was used to combine the 8 lasers and the laser vibration detectors were used defensively."

"...I see." Quenser thought for a bit. "In that case, we might have a chance. We need to think up a way to get up on that thing."

"What could you possibly do on top of it!?" Heivia's eyes opened wide. "Even if you climb up on top of the Object's spherical main body, the pilot Elite is hardly going to open the hatch to the cockpit. And the puny guns and explosives we have can't damage that main cannon!! Those monsters are specifically designed to keep that from happening!!"

"With its focus on lasers, the Deep Optical likely cannot keep its defenses up to the level needed in a real battle just with thick armor. Laser beams are delicate enough as they are, but they've combined 8 of them together. That main cannon is filled with delicate parts. It's like building a pyramid of cards higher and higher."

"So what!?"

"We can use that." While underwater, Quenser pulled out his handheld device. "We overheard tons of information related to the

Deep Optical before heading into the maintenance base in the Loyauté district. We can use some of that data here. But to use it, we have to get up on the Deep Optical first."

As he spoke, Quenser held a hand out toward Heivia.

"Hand me your knife, Heivia. The tiny little cooking knife in my survival kit isn't going to cut it here. I need your pointlessly large combat knife."

"What are you going to do with a knife!?"

"Get us something to use in place of a rope. The tungsten filters should do the trick. They're several dozen meters long and are more than strong enough to support our weight."

"Are you serious? Are you seriously thinking of using a rope to climb up that Object as it moves around the sea at over 200 kph? You'll just end up looking stupider than someone wiping out while water skiing!! And even if you do get up on it, the Deep Optical will just fling you off when it makes a wide turn!! This is not an environment conducive to rock climbing!!"

"I never said I was going to do that." After checking on the information he needed, Quenser put his handheld device away and pulled his radio out in its place. "We can just take the elevator. "

Part 12

As the Baby Magnum moved around at high speed, the Deep Optical moved at much slower speeds, parried with its various cannons, and bought time with its blinding weapon. All the while, a tremendous exchange of shells continued.

But then a change came over the Baby Magnum's actions.

All seven of its main cannon arms had been using the low-stability plasma cannon option, but one of them rotated like a revolver and switched over to the coilgun.

Amidst the many low-stability plasma cannon shots, a single giant metal coilgun shell was fired.

It was not targeting the Deep Optical itself. If it did, it would just end being deflected by a laser parry.

The princess was targeting the ocean surface below the Deep Optical. A crater several dozen meters across was created and a spray of water that was closer to an explosive blast than a wave dyed the air white.

The Deep Optical floated in the air using its air cushions, but it could still be greatly affected by the condition of the ocean surface.

As more and more metal shells were fired, the Deep Optical very nearly capsized.

But it managed to recover.

It fired a large number of lasers from its side to cause an explosive expansion of the air beneath the falling side of the spherical body. This pushed it back up. This momentum was used to force the craft back up from an almost 80 degree tilt.

How did the Deep Optical interpret that attack?

Had the Baby Magnum been attempting to slow the Deep Optical's evasive speed by destroying its footing?

Had the Baby Magnum been trying to damage the delicate equipment within the Deep Optical by shaking the entire Object?

Many ideas must have passed through its pilot's mind.

But all of them were wrong.

What the princess had been instructed via radio to do was...

Part 13

Quenser and Heivia stood near the very top of the Deep Optical's spherical main body. The filter cloth was bent in a U shape around one of the relatively small cannons. It was supporting them in the place of a rope.

"Shit!! The surface is wet so I keep slipping! If we fall from this height, even the ocean is deadly!!"

"You should be thanking your luck that there's seawater here to slip on! If the residual heat from a laser firing was still here, we might have been turned into human torches!!"

The two had not simply climbed up the side of the spherical main body.

They did not have the time for that and even if they had attempted it, the magnetic sensors and other sensors would have detected them and they would have been immediately shaken off.

They had taken a simple shortcut.

"I can't believe you would think to wrap the filter around a cannon on the top in the instant the Deep Optical lost its balance. As always, your ideas use our lives as collateral!!"

"But thanks to that, we could use the Deep Optical righting itself to pull us to the top all at once."

The princess's attack had brought the Deep Optical down by 80 degrees. In other words, it had very nearly fallen horizontally to the ocean surface. There had only been just over 20 meters between the ocean surface and the top of the spherical main body. With a weight on the end of the filter, they had been able to throw it that distance.

"Anyway, we need to hurry to the main cannon! When the Deep Optical has had to right itself like that previously it has focused on evasion and disturbance tactics, and does not use its main cannon

for a few minutes. But once its automatic scan is over, it will begin the fight anew. If that happens with us here, the radiant heat will roast us!!"

"What exactly are we going to do!? The main cannon is covered in thick armor. Our rifle and explosives can't damage it!!" shouted Heivia as he headed after Quenser.

Quenser arrived at a portion of the main cannon's base to the upper right of the Object. He pulled some Hand Axe plastic explosive from his backpack, tore off a small bit, and stuck it on the side of the base. Once he was done, he stabbed an electric fuse into it.

Heivia brought his hand to his forehead.

"That's nowhere near enough to get through Object armor!!"

"You help too, Heivia!!" shouted back Quenser as he tossed a package of explosive to Heivia. "We don't have time!! We need to set up 20 more just like what I did here!!"

"God dammit. This isn't going to do anything!!" swore Heivia as he moved up next to Quenser.

As he continued the work, Quenser said, "Make the explosives small. Don't make them too big. That would be pointless."

"What? Don't we need them to be as big as possible to have even the slightest chance of doing any damage to the armor?"

"I'm not trying to break through the surface."

They heard a metallic creaking noise.

The Deep Optical's main cannon was starting to perform minute adjustments to its aim.

"Time's up, Quenser!! If we don't get out of here, the heat'll kill us!!"

"Just 7 more!!"

"We're gonna get roasted!!"

"3...2...Okay, done!!"

Quenser stood up and immediately started running down the side of the spherical main body. In other words, he ran down a steep slope heading to the sea.

Heivia lost his cool.

"You have got to be kidding me! You don't have a gentler means of escape!?"

"Hurry!! If that main cannon fires, we'll be burned more horribly than a newlywed wife's home cooking!!"

After seeing Quenser run off ahead, Heivia followed suit while half in tears.

The slope of the spherical main body gradually grew steeper and Heivia's feet eventually got tangled up on each other. He just

barely managed to get the footing to take one last step and leap towards the sea.

He jumped from a height of over 30 meters.

He felt weightless for a few seconds, but an unpleasant pressure soon filled his stomach.

He struck the ocean surface in the next instant. Heivia felt a shock more powerful than if he had run full tilt into a sheet of plywood.

He very nearly passed out in the ocean, but a pure white flash of light that seemed to crush his eyes forced back his consciousness .

The Deep Optical had fired its main cannon.

"Cough!! Cough cough!!"

"Heivia, you have your oxygen tank, right!? Don't panic and use it!!"

Heivia heard Quenser's advice over the radio, but he could not respond. Quenser then reached a hand over from nearby and brought the mouthpiece to Heivia's mouth.

Once Heivia had regained oxygen and calm, he wrapped his hands around Quenser's neck.

"Die!! This is why I never want to go along with your horrible plans!!"

"Stop it, Heivia!! Are you in such a panic you want to cling to a guy!? Our job isn't over yet! If we do nothing, the Deep Optical will defeat the princess!!"

"But what can we do with those tiny explosives?" asked Heivia as he finally removed his hands from Quenser's neck.

Quenser pulled out his radio and said, "Remember all the information we gathered on the Object in the Loyauté district? The Deep Optical is a mass of laser technology with unbelievable firepower, but that also means it contains a mass of delicate equipment inside. They have to worry about shocks to the outside and even the G forces created by high-speed movements."

"And?"

"Just making the armor thick isn't enough to protect that delicate equipment."

Quenser moved his thumb repeatedly, and each time an explosive noise reverberated through the water.

The princess aboard the Baby Magnum heard every radio transmission between the two boys and could see the explosions.

And she probably knew the exact numbers involved better than the two idiots who had set up the explosives.

That level of explosion could not so much as scratch the Object's armor.

In fact, it was not even enough to blow up your average tank.

(What are they after? I hope that is not all they have. If so, I wasted my time helping them do it!!)

She then heard Quenser continue his explanation over the radio.

"That is why it has devices installed to electronically absorb the shocks. They keep a large gap in the armor and any shocks to the outer layer are sensed with laser vibration detectors. They can then counterbalance the shockwave running through the armor and cushion the inner armor. The shock will transfer through the countless pillars, but the lasers are faster. By cutting off any shocks that exceed the allowable limit, they can protect the delicate equipment."

"That just means their armor is more of a pain to deal with than just a thick wall, right? That just means the explosions will do even less damage!"

"Not necessarily," replied Quenser immediately as he continued the seemingly meaningless explosions.

The princess frowned as she zigzagged the Baby Magnum around.

She still could not tell what he was after.

"The laser vibration detectors are meant to detect vibrations coming in from outside, but it is best not to move around too much if you want to up the accuracy. In other words, if you have it

reacting to every little vibration, you run the risk of a delayed response to a larger shock you truly need to deal with. To keep the accuracy high, the shocks too small to have any negative effects on the delicate equipment are overlooked."

As the high heat caused when the lasers passed through ran the risk of disturbing the liquid, it was likely that either a fast-acting coolant was used or the liquid prism itself was divided into cartridges. But what if vibrations came from somewhere the designers never expected?

"The explosives send just a slight shock into the armor. By pumping in small shocks like that repeatedly, we can shift the position of the delicate equipment bit by bit. It may not even amount to a hundredth of a millimeter."

"What good is something on a level only a craftsman cares about?"

"Plenty. The liquid prism collects the optical energy for the main cannon. The light is bent by intentionally altering the density of the liquid inside the container by electrochemical means. By sending repeated vibrations into it, the intentionally-altered density will become uniform. And that means..."

Each individual shock made it to the prism.

And the result was as follows:

In the next instant, the Deep Optical's main cannon became wrapped in a brilliant flash of light and disappeared.

At that moment, the energy from 8 carbon dioxide lasers within the Deep Optical's main cannon was being gathered at the base of the giant main cannon.

Lasers were emitted by exposing excited electrons to external light. The stronger that light, the stronger the emitted laser.

In a way, the Deep Optical's main cannon was a laser beam weapon that created a massive stimulated emission by pumping in the optical energy of 8 standard main cannon laser beams.

A mere mirror could not be used to gather the energy from all eight.

It required a device called a liquid prism. A special liquid inside a clear container that had its density intentionally altered electrochemically so that the light was bent like a sugar sculpture.

The liquid prism could freely bend the light with changes in the liquid's density, but without an irregularity to the density in the clear container, it could not function properly.

What would happen if a set shock was continually applied to that clear container containing a liquid with an altered density?

The answer was simple.

The shaking of the container's contents would even out the density of the liquid that was supposed to be of irregular density.

And without that irregular density, the light would no longer be bent.

The light that was supposed to be bent would pass straight through it.

And this would tear the Deep Optical's main cannon apart from the inside.

The light of the explosion assaulted Quenser and Heivia's eyeballs even through their closed eyelids.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Quenser shouted in pain, but he breathed a sigh of relief at the same time. His plan had worked. The Deep Optical's main cannon had been blown off, and the energy of the explosion had to have done serious damage to the Object as a whole. Even if the entire Object had not been destroyed, it was no match for the princess without its main cannon.

But...

"What...?" muttered Heivia in confusion.

The Deep Optical tilted to the side. The energy from the explosion was pushing it to the side and it was beginning to capsize. Not only had the main cannon been torn apart from the inside, but it had completely melted and the armor of the main body had been torn up near where it had been.

There was no way it could continue fighting.

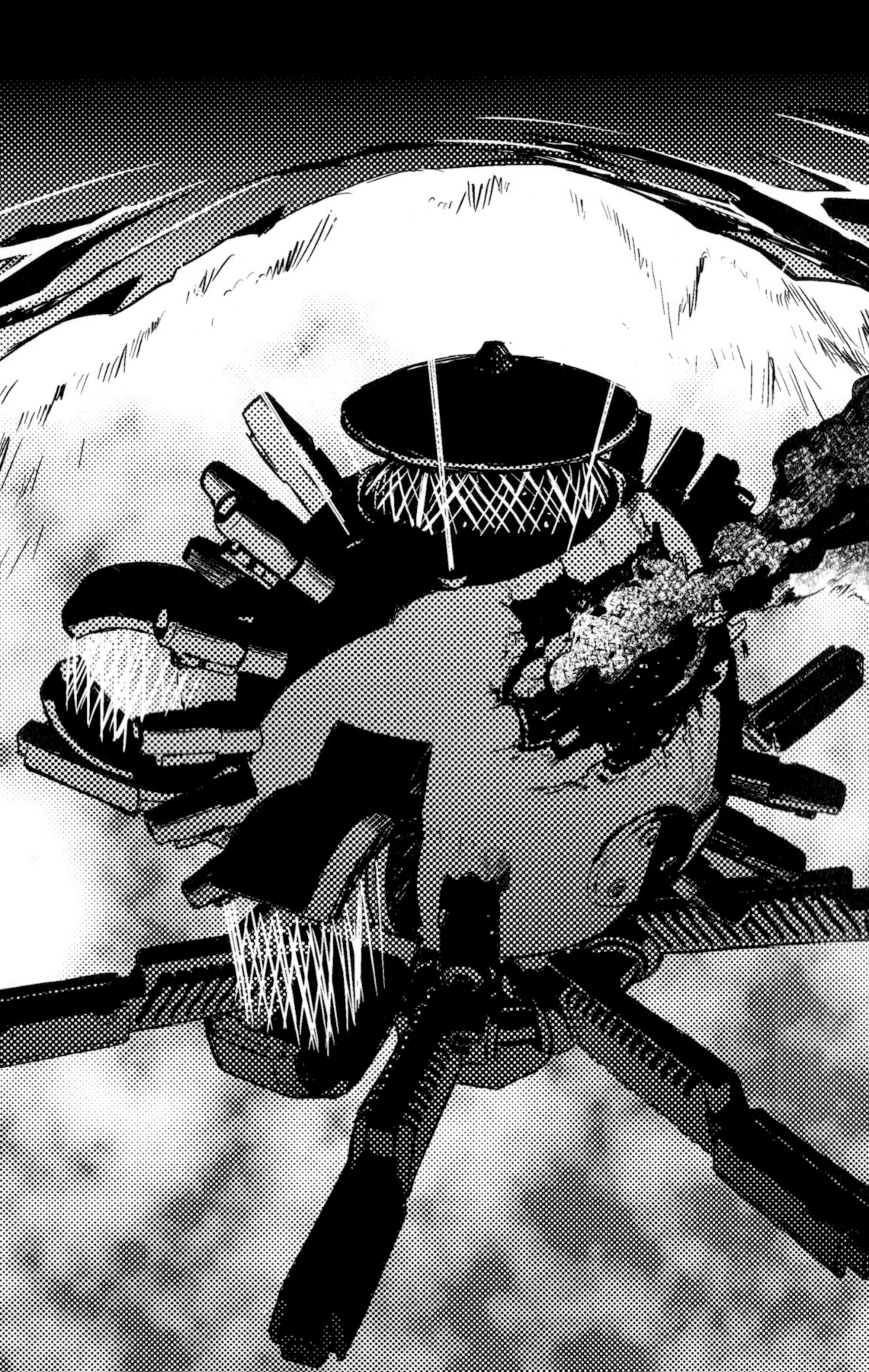
In fact, it was entirely possible it was too damaged to use its lasers and right itself.

And the Deep Optical did not even try to recover from its tilt.

It simply rotated around.

...Almost as if it was switching to another mode.

"Wha-...!?"



Its silhouette changed. The two large parts on the back of the spherical main body opened up and spread out like curved wings. It was still hovering above the surface of the water, but it was no longer using air cushions; it was using nothing but the power of lasers. Lasers were reflected between the ocean's surface and the bottom of the craft to explosively expand the air. The ends of the portions that had functioned as "legs" up until then opened up and lenses for laser weapons could be seen within.

While staring in blank shock, Heivia shouted, "It transformed!! What the hell!? Are the reactor and cockpit installed like gyroscopes!?"

"Dammit."

They had thought it was finally over.

They had thought they could return to the maintenance base zone and continue their vacation.

But...

"Does this mean we've only now made the Deep Optical get serious about this!?"

They had finally reached a turning point.

The Capitalist Corporations' Second Generation Object began its counterattack.

Part 14

When Quenser and Heivia fought an Object, they were usually entirely ignored as actual threats by the enemy.

If the Object took actions to kill them from the very beginning and kept them in the center of its sights as a priority target, there was no way flesh-and-blood soldiers had any hope of winning.

They would be unable to run away or evade even if they tried. No cover would be of any use.

But...

Even if the Deep Optical had escaped any trouble by transforming, it was unlikely to ignore the people who had destroyed its original main cannon.

"Shit. Here it comes. That monster is headed this way, Quenser!! " shouted Heivia, despite the fact that there was nothing the two of them could hope to do.

One of its new main laser beam cannons turned toward them. Without hesitation, an orange beam of light flew directly towards Quenser and Heivia.

Just before it did, the princess's Baby Magnum interposed itself between them and the beam.

"Quenser!!" shouted the princess.

"Can't you be worried about me, too!?" complained Heivia, but it was hardly the time for that.

The overall impression given off by the Deep Optical had changed.

While creating great explosive noises, it slid back and forth and fired laser beam after laser beam at the Baby Magnum. Its speed had undergone a great change. Before, the Deep Optical had been unable to move faster than about 200 kph, but now it was dancing around the Baby Magnum at speeds 4 or 5 times greater. It was easily handling the Baby Magnum which had proven it could handle your average Generation Two in the past.

【ディープオプティカル(変形後)】
DEEP OPTICAL(TRANSFORMED)

全長…100メートル(主砲最大展開時)

最高速度…時速730キロ

装甲…2センチ×33層(溶接など不純物含む)+
レーザー振動検知式相殺装置

用途…対オブジェクト用駆逐兵器

分類…海上戦闘特化型(第二世代)

運用者…資本企業「クライアントセキュリティ社」

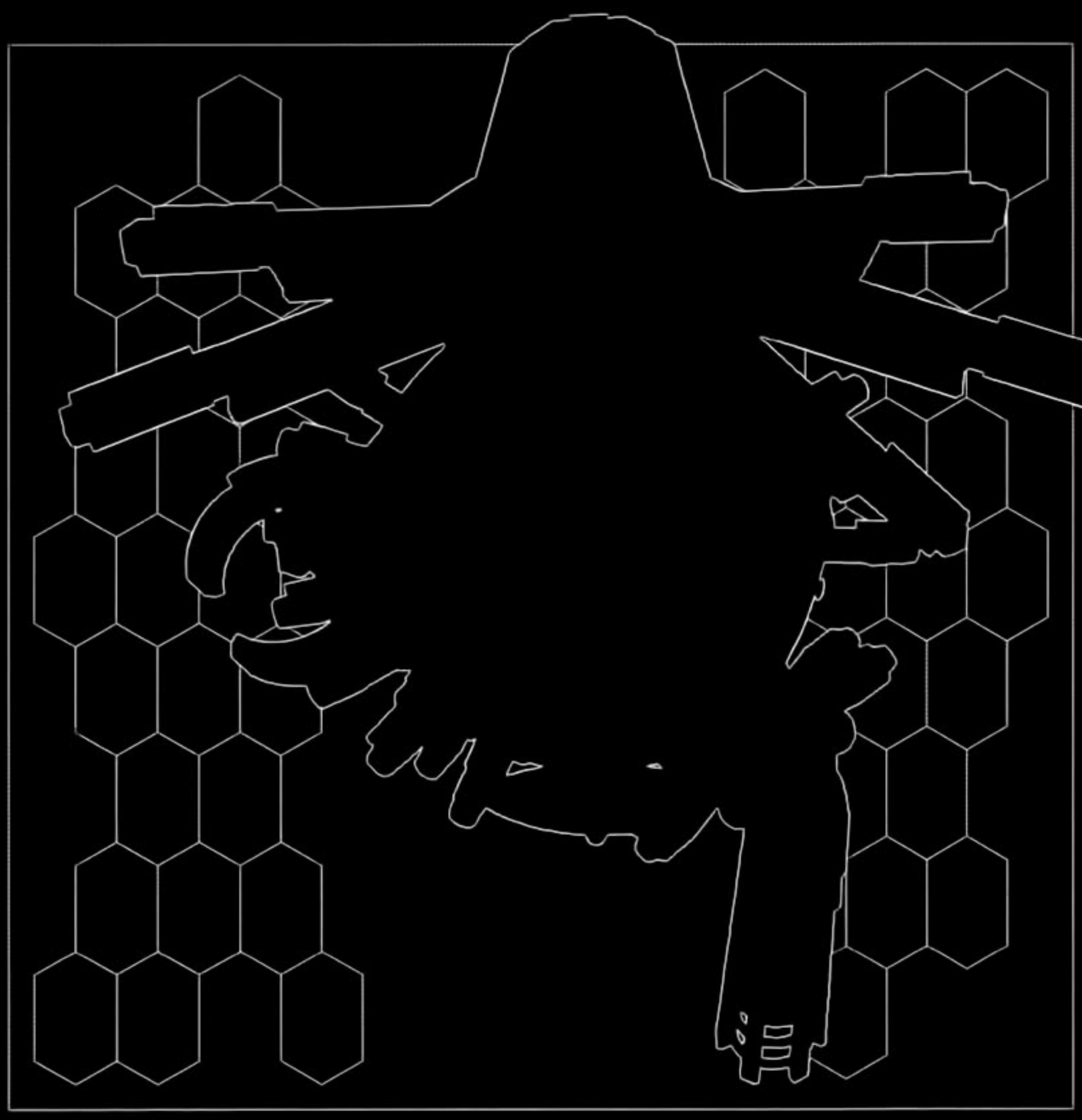
仕様…完全レーザービーム射出型推進システム

主砲…YAGレーザー×8

副砲…レーザービームなど

コードネーム…ディープオプティカル(様々な光学技術の塊である事から)

メインカラーリング…アッシュブルー



DEEP OPTICAL(TRANSFORMED)

"Shit!! What is going on!?"

"Those C-shaped wings on the back of the Deep Optical are used to reflect lasers. It uses those to intentionally detonate the air and give it quick bursts of speed. This gives it acceleration you could never hope to get with rocket boosters!!"

"I thought it avoided sudden movements because of the delicate equipment in the lasers!"

"It must want to overcome this situation even if it ends up destroying its own main system! These main cannons are likely solid-state lasers that use YAG. That's the very first optical weapon ever developed and it therefore has the simplest design."

"Solid-state lasers have high outputs but can't be fired for long, right?"

"Yes, and as you can see, it can't put out as much heat, so the princess's armor can withstand a few hits. When the previous lasers roasted the dust and moisture in the air, it created a pure white beam, but this has fallen to orange." Quenser calmly analyzed the situation. "Most likely, it fires repeatedly similar to a machinegun in order to make the best use of the short firing time. If it fires at the same spot repeatedly, it might be able to tear open the armor. However, the armor can hold up for a while if the princess makes sure it hits at skewed points."

"But either way the princess will be taken out eventually!! And once our shield is gone, we're dead!!"

"..."

Quenser thought for a bit and then took out some plastic explosive.

"Princess, how much time can you buy us against the Deep Optical?"

"Not enough to call it anything as cool as 'buying you time'."

"Just give us 10 minutes," said Quenser as he breathed a sigh of relief that she was calm enough to joke about it. "That should be enough."

Part 15

The first to notice the oddity was Froleytia Capistrano as she monitored the Baby Magnum and the battlefield as a whole.

"What?"

She could hardly be blamed for being confused.

An explosion had suddenly occurred amongst the frames that made up a large portion of the plant. And the explosion did not spread out evenly. It was vertical. A few of the frames were blown to pieces and a pillar of water shot a few dozen meters straight up into the air.

"Is there anything explosive there?"

"N-no! Most of the plant is filled with filters meant to collect tungsten from the ocean water. Gas turbines are used to draw in the filters, but an entirely different machine does that. It is not normally attached to them. There should be nothing explosive there."

As Froleytia received that report from the electronic simulation department, a second and third explosion occurred.

"Explosions from within the sea..."

"Even if the Legitimacy Kingdom funds it, that is essentially a civilian facility in a blank area. I have never heard of any sea mines being placed in the ocean around it. We are performing a satellite search to determine whether it is an enemy UUV or fish robot!"

Froleytia had a bad feeling about what it might be, so she opened a few new windows on her laptop.

(I need the test firing report lists for official Legitimacy Kingdom armaments...)

She called up a diagram displaying the test results of various explosives.

It contained data on the spread of the blast, fragmentation, heat, and other effects when detonated under various environments, in different forms, and under different conditions.

(How does the blast spread when the Hand Axe plastic explosive is detonated underwater?)

When she set those search conditions, detailed numerical data and a simple diagram of the spread of the blast appeared on the screen. It seemed the diagram would change in real time if she entered the amount of explosive and the depth under the water.

When Froleytia saw it, she felt a bit dizzy.

It was almost exactly the same as the pillars of water she had just seen.

"Those brats... Why in the hell are they blowing up the plant they're supposed to be protecting!?"

Part 16

As Quenser detonated the plastic explosives from a safe distance, he spoke to Heivia who was looking through his rifle scope.

"How high were those!?"

"The first one was 27.1. The second was 30.5! That's just barely there, right!? How are things going on your end!?"

"Well enough. Now it's just up to the princess."

"Hey, Quenser. Our huge-breasted commander has been screaming at us over the radio for a bit now. What are we supposed to tell her?"

"You're still connected to the channel? I cut it off a while ago."

"Sometimes I am truly in awe of your guts..."

As they spoke, the two boys moved on to the next step.

Even then, the Deep Optical was trying to attack Quenser and Heivia, and the Baby Magnum was taking the hits to act as their shield.

The princess used her brilliant talents (that she had been artificially given) to keep the lasers from hitting the same spot too many times, but the entire spherical main body had begun to glow orange.

They had no time.

"Heivia, you dive down and remove the weights from the bottom of the filters! I'll cut off the filters with the knife!!"

"Tch. I'm not gonna get decompression sickness am I!?"

As the filters were cut loose, the cloth floated up near the surface of the water. Quenser cut loose several dozen, so they quickly spread out amongst the surrounding water.

Quenser contacted the princess via radio.

"I've scattered some filters packed full of tungsten. Don't pass over them!!"

"How are you going to destroy the Deep Optical with filters?"

"Isn't it obvious? The shiny surface of the filters will reflect the lasers."

However, the Deep Optical was covered in various sensors.

It had surely noticed the large number of filters floating near the ocean surface.

It made quick movements back and forth to avoid the filters. And it did so with its propulsion device that detonated the air using lasers.

The princess gasped and said, "It's no good. They have noticed them!! You cannot interfere with the lasers keeping the Deep Optical afloat!!"

"Those aren't the ones I'm after," said Quenser as he reached for the switch on his radio.

Yes.

The switch that sent the detonation signal to the electric fuses for the Hand Axe plastic explosives attached to the filters.

"I'm targeting the giant wings it uses for quick turns!!"

As he shouted, several plastic explosives detonated simultaneously. Instead of spreading in every direction, the underwater explosions shot pillars of water straight up.

And they brought the shattered fragments of the filters with them.

Some of them made it within the C-shaped wings on the back of the Deep Optical's spherical main body. At the same time, powerful lasers were being reflected around within the wings causing the air to explosively expand.

The tungsten that was blown into the middle of it all threw the reflection of the lasers out of order which in turn caused a massive error in the angle of the Object's turn. And this was at the same time that the Deep Optical was making repeated small curves to avoid the filters that it had mistaken for sea mines.

In the middle of one of those quick turns, it lost its balance.

The entire Object tilted far to the side.

Before, it had used reflected lasers to detonate the air and recover, but it could no longer use that once it had transformed.

That left only one fate for the giant weapon.

It had to sink.

It could not right itself and it could not rotate 180 degrees and transform.

While sending a great spray of water into the air like someone wiping out while water skiing, the Deep Optical attempted to recover.

But then one last strike finished it off.

This strike came from a low-stability plasma cannon equipped on the Legitimacy Kingdom's First Generation Baby Magnum.

And it exploded.

With a brilliant flash of white light, a great shock rushed across the surface of the ocean.

It was not clear if it was caused by the Deep Optical sliding across the ocean surface or if it was caused by the giant explosion that occurred afterwards, but a tremendous wave spread out across the area. And the wave did not just affect the surface. Quenser and Heivia had dived down below the surface, but they were still tossed around like ice in a glass being shaken.

"Cough!! Cough cough!!"

Quenser had a stable source of air from his oxygen tank, but the sudden loss of any sense of up or down confused him so much he felt like he had forgotten how to breathe.

"Is it over?"

"We still haven't gotten the white flag signal from the Capitalist Corporations. It seems they still wish to fight," replied the princess.

"Sink their lifeboats or something. They'll change their minds once they see firsthand that nothing but a watery grave awaits them if they don't surrender here."

With that comment, Quenser headed for the bright ocean surface.

He could not think of a single reason to stay in the dark depths any longer.

Epilogue

While soaking wet, Quenser and Heivia were recovered by a Legitimacy Kingdom motorboat.

When they exchanged information on the incident, Heivia frowned.

"So the Capitalist Corporations unit controlling the Deep Optical was trying to intervene in Oceania's food supply problems ?"

"Due to the unstable balance between vegetation and desert in Oceania, grazing land was banned. Almost all of their meat was imported by the Capitalist Corporations. The Capitalist Corporations didn't want the Information Alliance's artificial livestock facilities to rob them of that source of money."

But in reality, a serious risk of widespread hunger existed if natural disasters like cyclones did large-scale damage to the farms and cut off the air and sea routes. Simulations showed as many as half a million people starving to death.

"Was that ever resolved?" That seemed to be Heivia's primary question. "We may have blown the Deep Optical to pieces, but that does not solve everything. As long as that unit and the backbone they set up remains, they can still interfere with the food supply, right?"

"That would certainly be a problem," admitted Quenser. "But if this was a Capitalist Corporations-wide project, don't you think a

few more Objects would have been sent in as reinforcements? The battlefield was right next to Oceania where plenty of Objects are stationed as part of the coalition. And that of course includes Capitalist Corporations Objects. And yet only the Deep Optical was deployed for this."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the interference in Oceania's food supply will all come to an end with the Deep Optical and its unit out of the picture."

"But how do we pull that off? Don't tell me you think the two of us should head off on our own to attack the Capitalist Corporations' maintenance base zone."

"…Do you think we could do it?"

"No for two reasons," said Heivia simply. "First, they are still an entire battalion even if they have lost their Object. Super heroes though we may be, it's reckless to think just the two of us can take on 1000 soldiers. And second, think of our position here. We are the winners with the Object while the Capitalist Corporations unit is the loser that had their Object destroyed. If we go in for a further attack now, international society will see it is an unrelentless and merciless slaughter. We would be making enemies of the majority that want to maintain the concept of the clean war."

"But there is always an exception."

"?"

"If someone becomes enough of a problem, there are special forces to assassinate that target. This is a case for a police-type force, not a military one. Luckily, we met some of those and we know how to contact them. That Capitalist Corporations unit joined forces with Roybelz Oldnick for their own profit. That should be enough to make them a target, don't you think?"

"You mean Valkyrie? Do you really think they would help? Are you sure they aren't going to attack *us* because we didn't hold up our end of the bargain?"

"We made a deal with the local fishermen, remember? If we're lucky Oldnick's DNA will show up in a fish's stomach."

"…The fishermen really didn't seem to like that."

"Please respond," said Quenser once he set the frequency on his small radio.

His attempts to contact them earlier had failed, but they had to at least recognize the frequency.

"Hey, Quenser. Do you really think the Faith Organization will act on this?"

"The unit's interference with the food supply was expected to leave to over half a million dying in the case of an irregular cyclone. …That would include people from the tribal religions native to Oceania, so they can't exactly refuse."

Quenser and Heivia had ended the battle in a decidedly cool fashion, but a slight problem arose when they went back over the information.

They had been unable to bring back the body of their target Roybelz Oldnick, they had damaged the Legitimacy Kingdom-funded precious metal ocean mining plant, and serious damage had been done to the Baby Magnum as it acted as a shield for them.

Also, there was no guarantee that any of Oldnick's flesh would turn up in a fish's stomach.

"Th-this is bad. We have no good to cancel out the bad!! I don't see a single oasis in the middle of our huge-breasted commander's lecture!!"

"Well, it can't always conveniently even out to nothing. But that also means the plus side might come out on top someday. We can't give up."

Quenser and Heivia spoke as they headed down the path to the execution room (aka Froleytia's officer room).

"But y'know, this had to do with platinum, tungsten, the Treasure of Electron Mathematics, beef, and artificial livestock facilities…It was all resources, resources, resources. It makes me sick."

"And you could say we're human resources," said Heivia with a grin. "In a certain island nation with an aging population and a

low birthrate, children are a valuable growing resource. Just like wine and art, their value goes up if you let them age. A company will create prestigious schools under its direct control and search out the most gifted children to raise the most valuable people to contribute to the company in the future. Meanwhile, rival companies will try to either abduct or kill anyone they think will become a top class contributor in order to do damage to the first company's future."

"What's so great about dividing everyone up by their grades?"

"That is what the companies need for now," said Heivia. "The days of heating up a pot with charcoal are over. But once activated charcoal began being used in water purification systems, what counted as 'cutting-edge technology' took a step back. There are no absolutes when it comes to dividing up resources. And that is why we have yet to run out of oil despite everyone always saying we are about to run out. How we use it is changing almost daily, so the relative value we use against the absolute amount of remaining deposits is constantly changing."

"And does that also go for the food supply and the people who eat that food?"

"If someone wants to use it, anything can become a resource. That's what it means to live in a world of greed. …In a world like that, even the value of the life of a soldier could change. It all depends on how we use soldiers and if that changes."

They arrived before Froleytia's officer room.

Quenser and Heivia gave a hesitant knock, opened the door, and prepared themselves for a hellish lecture time.

The first thing their commander said to them was, “Whatever you do, don’t drive down your value as a resource any further. If it drops any more, I won’t be able to cover for you.”

Afterword

If all goes as planned, this should be Volume 4. When writing multiple volumes at the same time, it can be a little unclear which one will be released first…

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Swimsuits!!!!! No, actually this was a Christmas story.

The theme was resources. You could even view Chapter 1 as a story that begins with the human resources named Quenser and Heivia being stolen.

In the world of these novels, they have a few different methods of acquiring food and rare earth elements. The Treasure of Electron Mathematics method of creating artificial platinum is based on a similar technique that actually exists, so check it out if you are interested.

As all of the Objects so far had been based on high-speed battles, I wanted to have a Second Generation Object that had all sorts of abilities allowing it to function without using high speed movements. The Deep Optical here is even slower than the Tri-Core from Volume 1.

The laser weapons themselves have no issue with speed. In fact, you would need to break the light speed barrier to be faster than

them. The real problem was that I had to add on several weaknesses to keep it from being too overpowered to play its role in the story.

Just like a railgun, this weapon is not just some fantastical piece of technology. It is a type of weapon that could very well become standard one day, so perhaps it is our role as fiction writers to have several countermeasures stocked up.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagiryo-san and my editor Miki-san. …As always, I get the feeling the backgrounds and small details make this a difficult story to work on. I am truly grateful they have stuck with me this far.

I also give my thanks to all you readers. I think it is due to all your support that I was able to have an entire chapter filled swimsuits and not a single Object. I am truly thankful.

And so, I think I will end this here.

I lay down my pen while hoping this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Are the heroines a type of resource for a novel?

-Kamachi Kazuma

References and Translation Notes

1. ↑ Tsun from **Tsun**dere.
2. ↑ Yan from **Yan**dere